

## *The Nancy Darlings*

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### **Part I**

#### **Chapter 1, 1981-1992**

A child's name is a wish. Linda drew a star next to *Genevieve* in the book of baby names when there was nothing more in her belly than a dust-sized mite of flesh. She practiced saying the name aloud. *Genevieve, come to dinner. Genevieve, that's your brother's toy. Good night, Genevieve, I love you.* The name suited her future daughter just right. *Genevieve Stuart.* It'd look good on a business card or stenciled on the frosted glass of an office door. The name echoed in her head, and Linda knew she'd be having a girl and that the girl would love her name. Linda became so accustomed to thinking of her daughter as *Genevieve* that she let the name slip at her husband's family reunion on a sweltering Labor Day weekend. They had just announced they were expecting. Her sister-in-law, Hilary, also pregnant, had been posing for a photo, standing next to a watermelon as a way of comparison. She was due in late November. Hilary spoke to Linda with a wide-eyed look as if she'd been stirred awake. "My, Genevieve is a beautiful name. Ain't that pretty Mike?" Mike had wanted to name their daughter Norma, for a reason that made everyone suspicious: He'd once had a girlfriend in high school named Norma.

Three months later, Linda's *Genevieve* had grown to the size of a squash. The elastic of her stretch pants left red marks over the small bulge in her stomach. Linda and her husband Virgil went to visit Hilary in the maternity ward to coo over the newborn. They didn't ask what Hilary and Mike were going to name their baby. They assumed that *Norma* has been decided upon. But then a nurse came into the room holding a clipboard. "Genevieve. Oh, I like that name! How do you plan on spelling it?" And the balloons Linda had been holding flew out of her hand and burst when they touched the ceiling. The baby woke up and screamed. Four hours old and already a thief.

"You know that was our name, Hilary," Linda said. "Genevieve is our daughter's name."

Hilary looked at Linda aghast. "I never knew. Honey, you never mentioned it to me before. Ain't that right, Mike?"

The baby wailed and reached for her mother's full breasts, swollen and green-veined. Hilary shooed the hand away and stuffed a bottle into the baby's open mouth. Linda started to say that breastfeeding was healthier, but stopped herself.

"They can share the name," Hilary cooed. "Won't that be cute as can be? Two Genevieves." There was no rule that cousins couldn't share a name.

"No rule but good taste," Linda said, who was sounding more and more like her own mother.

Linda's husband Virgil stepped in. He was the one paying for the private room at the county hospital so that Hilary could get some sleep. He raised his hands between his wife and sister. The best solution would be to divide the name in half, he suggested. One girl Gen, the other Eve. Two syllables that, when joined, sounded like a heroine with flaxen hair trailing over red-fallen leaves. Linda snorted. "Listen to you, King Solomon." She walked out of the room and

headed to the elevator. Her child would have her own name. It'd be a name she'd never heard before, not one out of some damned baby book. She waited and waited for the name to come to her. In late April, her water broke while she admired a bright pink bush humming with bees. Between contractions she asked Virgil what the flowering bush was called. "Azaleas," he told her, and the old name withered and a new one bloomed.

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The name *Azalea* reminded Linda of the girl she had once been, the one who liked macramé purses, water coloring, and stadium-rock concerts. The name *Genevieve* slowed the tongue down to a murmur. Schoolmates and softball coaches would inevitably shorten it to *Gen*. *Azalea* was like the girl Linda had left behind when she got pregnant right in the middle of graduate school with her firstborn, a boy, Eli, named after a favorite uncle who had left nickels in her sock drawer. Azalea could pick up where Linda had left off and keep going and going.

After Azalea was born, Linda pretended there were no hard feelings between her and Hilary, but she was determined to never let her sister-in-law take anything from her again. Tupperware containers were immediately cleaned and removed. Drill bits her husband left were labeled and counted upon return. VHS tapes ejected from the VCR before anyone could finish watching them.

"You can't leave anything just lying around with them." Linda told her Azalea to leave her toys at home if she wanted to see them again. "They'll take it and tell you to share."

It was bad enough Hilary and Mike lived in the Hammond County house and never paid the rent on time. Virgil had bought the two-bedroom for his aging father, a drunk who found Jesus at the last minute, and who had never owned anything in his life aside from an always-ancient Ford pick-up. He died in his fifties from diseases that comfortable people die of in their

nineties. To pay the mortgage, Virgil asked for the rent every month from Mike. Sometimes he received it, sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he pretended to receive it to avoid Linda's wrath. He believed Hilary's circumstances were forgivable. He'd drawn a better hand than his sister – he was a quick study. He could make himself stay up late over biology flashcards then get up at four in the morning to walk five miles and pick tobacco. He'd worked for a few years as carpenter before his name got pulled in the last draft to Vietnam, made it out at age twenty-three, and the government paid for his college tuition. Virgil now had a well-paying job as a social worker at the V.A. Unlike her brother, when Hilary was tired she slept. Or stretched across the couch watching talk shows, or stayed for weeks with the covers over her head, not showering. She'd been working on her nursing degree for seven years at the women's college in Midway, but dropped out when Genevieve was born.

As for Virgil's youngest brother, Gil, he could ace a test just by carrying the textbook home. When Linda first met Virgil, she'd assumed that Gil was the son of a previous marriage, because he lived in the spare room of Virgil's house and gave her a sulking look when he answered the door. She was relieved to learn that Gil was Virgil's his younger brother by fourteen years. Their mother had died when Virgil was on his second tour. When Virgil returned home he discovered that his ten-year-old brother had ended up in a foster home due to the squalid conditions of their father's rented house, a fact which had been discovered after Gil threw a book at a teacher's head and a social worker went to investigate. Their daddy signed over custody of his last son to his first son, and ever since then Virgil had seen to Gil's raising. It was one of the many heroic things about Virgil that had attracted Linda, except this particular heroic thing was now an eighteen-year-old who sometimes cussed at her when she asked him to put dishes in the sink, and who played godawful punk music in the shed out back.

Linda was near to throwing Gil out of the house until Eli was born, a colicky baby who was never awake without crying. Once, in a desperate move, Linda went to the shed where Gil was playing guitar. She thrust Eli into his arms, claiming that she was exhausted and in need of a nap, but in reality, felt like she was inches away from leaving her son in the woods. When she woke up two hours later, there was no crying, only the sound of a vacuum cleaner. Gil had on a pair of head phones and the Hoover at full blast. Eli was not asleep but quietly awake and chewing on the collar of his uncle's leather jacket. Turned out Gil learned a thing or two about babies while in foster care. He would make faces and coo at them all afternoon, singing Ramones songs at a slowed down beat. When that didn't work, he'd let the vacuum run till their eyelids grew heavy. Gil could charm anyone under the age of twelve, especially Azalea. He treated her as a kind of co-conspirator, asking to her draw on his face before punk shows with magic markers. He recorded sessions of her squeaking out "Go Tell Aunt Rhodie" on her tiny, pre-school sized violin and sampled their recording sessions in his own music. As for Azalea, she seemed to believe that her Uncle Gil was a kind of deity sent to toss her in the air and glue eyes back on her favorite stuffed animals.

For a time, it seemed that Gil would make it out alright. He lived at home during all four years of college, majored in psychology, minored in music, graduated sigma cum laude, and planned on becoming a therapist like his older brother. Shortly after graduating he went to play a gig with his band in Cincinnati. Three days later he called from a pay phone in Madrid and said he'd never set foot in Kentucky again. Months passed. Azalea turned seven years old and at the end of her birthday party ran to the phone and checked all the messages on the answering machine. She was still young enough to believe that birthday wishes come true.

When she burst into tears, Linda explained, albeit gently and in child-appropriate language, that some men weren't worth shit. Gil had not called, and he would not call again for nearly twenty years.

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Genevieve and Azalea did not know that one had stolen the other's name, and yet they must have sensed a rift between their mothers because the desire for each other's company was charged with the passion of the forbidden. Usually it was Azalea and her family who drove to visit, otherwise Hilary might ask to borrow a thing and never return it. Azalea and Genevieve would run to greet each other, colliding in a hug that knocked them both to the ground. Genevieve, who was then taller than Azalea, picked her cousin off her feet and twirled her around. They joined hands as they galloped across the yard or sat across each other on the tire swing. Like most long-distance relationships, absence heightened their love. They rarely fought or even disagreed. Most of their time together was spent playing house, a make-believe story they had invented when they were toddlers and cooking dinner with play food and pots and pans from the kitchen. Azalea named herself after one of the characters from her mother's favorite TV show. She was a Blanche or a Rose or a Sophia. Later she would give herself names that other girls had, Stephanie, Heather, Crystal, Becca. Normal girl names that no one raised an eyebrow to, names that aged like leg-warmers and neon.

Gen liked the name Helen. When Azalea asked her why she said because it had two syllables and sounded how she felt. Gen always led the game. This didn't bother Azalea – it was Gen's house and anyway it always seemed that there was something about Gen that changed when she changed her name to Helen. She relaxed into herself, a sort of deepening into her skin. Helen was clear-voiced and whimsical. She liked to pick out songs on the toy piano, and dissect

flowers and make elaborate drawings of their gooey insides in a notebook. Gen was a watchful, back-talking girl who sighed like a waitress in an all-night diner. She got in trouble in school because she was bored, and spent much of recess in time out, drawing stick people with gravel on the cement while the other kids played. Helen seemed to be an outlet for Gen's privately accomplished part, the one who read chapter books by the time she was in kindergarten and could do long division in first grade. "Gen is as bright as her Uncle Gil," Hilary bragged. "Maybe even brighter."

Virgil and Linda didn't pay Hilary much mind until one year, Genevieve received a keyboard. Two months later Hilary had her daughter perform for them in the living room. She wore a yellow skirt with a flounce of tulle underneath and two bright sparkly barrettes on either side of her head. She played all of the Minuets from a Suzuki cassette tape that Hilary bought at a garage sale. Azalea didn't know what the fuss was about. Who listened to classical music anyway? Weren't children just given musical instruments so that they'd be better at math? But the look on her parents' faces told her that they were witnessing some kind of miracle. "She's a prodigy," Linda whispered.

"Gil was the same way. Ain't that right, Virgil?" smiled Hilary, who served them apple twists on paper plates.

Soon after that Linda and Virgil were paying for piano lessons with an older woman from First Baptist who led the Sunday school and was a retired music teacher. After the performance Genevieve changed into blue jeans. They ran outside to the barn. It was late March, the grass was soaking wet. The barn smelled of manure even no cattle had set foot in it in decades.

"How'd you learn to play so fast?" asked Azalea, who played the violin, poorly, but to the insistence of her mom, who believed that music lessons developed character and stamina.

Genevieve shrugged. “I learned from playing Helen.” They dumped the water out of the tire swing attached to the barn beam and pushed each other. In one of the stalls was Helen’s piano with the board keys drawn in chalk on two cinder blocks.

“Helen’s piano isn’t real though,” Azalea said.

Genevieve opened her mouth to speak, then shut it. Azalea felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. She had the strange sensation that there was a third person standing next to them, listening. This was a good moment to start the game. “Quick!” she yelled. “They’re coming!” And they ran upstairs to the hay loft.

The game was when the bandits would chase the girls. They’d be climbing a tree or walking across the field when Genevieve would put her hand out to stop them, and yell, “Quick!” And they would run shrieking into the barn. The bandits pursued the girls relentlessly with little warning. A crack of twigs breaking, a crow eyeing them from a walnut tree – these were all ominous signs that the bandits were coming. The cousins would take their positions on the second floor of the barn and watch through the cracks in the beams. Even though the bandits never arrived, it was thrilling to be scared of something that couldn’t reach you. Azalea’s always heart pounded as if they might. One in a while, Baby Mike, Gen’s little brother, would wander into the barn. “What are y’all doing?” They would land on him and take him as their captive, which he enjoyed despite his screaming.

Genevieve sometimes demanded that Baby Mike and Azalea kill her. Baby Mike was always more than eager to get rid of his older sister. They tied Gen’s wrists behind her back and led her down the hill to the creek. If the water was high enough, Gen walked into the middle of the creek where it rose up to her waist. Then Gen would sink into it, floating face down as the water slowly pushed her into the shallows. More than once she held her breath for so long that

Azalea swam over screaming, shaking her cousin to make sure that she wasn't really dead.

Azalea didn't see what was so great about pretending to be a corpse, but Genevieve claimed that she saw Heaven underneath the water. Azalea hated the game, yet somehow, she always ended up playing along without ever completely understanding how she'd been talked into it.

Genevieve was very good at getting her way.

Once, when the cousins were seven years old, Gen asked for a piece of candy at the gas station on the way to King's Island. When Aunt Hilary said no, Genevieve held her breath in the parking lot, sucking in her lips, her freckles stretched out full on her cheeks. A bluish color appeared around her jawline, her eyes appeared to be engaged in a staring contest with nobody. Aunt Hilary screamed for her daughter to breathe and smacked her on the back – but Genevieve passed out on the asphalt, right in an oil stain. Azalea was in awe. She tried it herself in the backseat of the van, with no success.

“You stop breathing till you see dots.” Genevieve licked her lollipop. “And then you stop breathing some more. And then when your body thinks it's going to die, you stop breathing some more.”

Azalea held her breath till the air hardened like concrete in her lungs and her vision perforated with black stars. She thought she might die and let the air out, panting. A rush filled her skull. She used it successfully when they arrived at King's Island and her mother wouldn't let her have another turn on the bumper cars. It was the first time she fainted. She could hear everyone's voice around her, like she was hiding in some kind of tunnel. When she opened her eyes her face was sticky. The frosty juice cup in the shape of a grape cluster had spilled on the ground. Linda ran ice cubes over her forehead and when it was clear that her daughter was fine,

she jerked Azalea up into the air by her collar and said through her teeth, “We’ll be having none of that.”

Nevertheless, Azalea was allowed to ride the bumper cars a third time.

On the ride home, Linda told Virgil that this new behavior was Genevieve’s fault. Not only that, but Azalea was now saying *ain’t* instead of *isn’t*. Azalea made a stupid joke. “No I ain’t.” This was ignored. Her mother’s temper was like air pressure, it thinned the air like a plane low on oxygen.

“I’m sick of going to Hammond County all the damned time.” Linda cracked open her window and blast of freeway air roared into the car. “Mike is only getting worse. He popped a balloon in my ear at the last time and then grabbed my ass.”

“The girls are peas in a pod,” said Virgil, who calmly drove onward. “They’re practically sisters.”

“Hello? I’m right here? I can hear everything you’re saying,” Azalea said, who got the nervous feeling that she might be parted from Genevieve who, when she thought about it, was the only person in the world she wanted to play with.

“Has he ever been rough with you?” Linda turned to the backseat and lowered her sunglasses to the tip of her nose.

“Uncle Mike?”

“He’s an asshole,” Eli said, twelve and rarely talking anymore, normally not allowed to say *asshole* unless Linda was in absolute agreement.

Linda gave a sharp nod and a *hmpf*.

Uncle Mike had slapped Azalea once when she was very little. Sometime around two or three, when the foggy memories turned into sharp ones. She had stood up from the little plastic

children's table to see Baby Mike, who was brand new, and whose crib with the star mobile stood in the hallway by the bedroom. She peered in between the bars. He was the color of a baby hamster, ugly, and sound asleep. Uncle Mike picked her up and placed her down in the living room and slapped her cheek – don't wake him up. It was unclear why her parents didn't know about this but Azalea realized that this might be an incident she would want to keep to herself.

“He's never been rough with me,” Azalea said.

Uncle Mike and Aunt Hilary weren't at all like the aunts and uncles on her mother's side, who told her how pretty she looked whenever she wore a dress, or how smart she was to calculate long division. Uncle Mike and Aunt Hilary gave hugs that were mostly just pats on the back. They were wholly uninterested in her violin lessons or her obsession with cheetahs. Part of going to Hammond County meant that Azalea hovered in the background, a few feet behind Genevieve, who had now made it to the local papers for her excellence in piano but still practiced at home on the keyboard. She practiced and no one even made her, and this seemed unreal to Azalea and evaporated any feelings of jealousy. No one made Genevieve do anything. So long as they didn't change the TV channel, they could do whatever they wanted, and the lack of anyone noticing them aside from when they trailed in mud on their shoes was a kind of freedom.

After making herself faint at King's Island, Azalea did not see Genevieve for two months. Her mother stayed home on the next visit to Hammond County to organize her closet. Eli went, but only because their father said they'd all go to the arcade on Sunday.

It was hard to tell at first, what had happened to the Hammond County house. From the road it looked perfectly normal. Then at the right turn at the driveway, a veil of white plastic sheeting blew up in the air. Azalea's father said, “What on earth – oh Lord, don't tell me.” They

parked the car on the grass to see better. The house was missing a side. Like a giant had come along and peeled the wall off. All that stood was the chimney. Plastic sheeting covered the place where a wall should have been. Uncle Mike had wanted to add a room for Baby Mike for a while and went along and did it. “That sonofabitch.” Virgil let out a sigh. Azalea shrank in her seat, glad her mother wasn’t here. Eli leaned out the window and asked his father what he was planning to do.

They got out of the car. It was July then, a couple days after the fourth. Firecracker wrappers lay strewn along the driveway and used poppers with tiny broken bags of gunpowder. Virgil took off his baseball cap and ran his hand over his beard. Uncle Mike came out the front door with two beers and a wide grin. “Surprise!”

“That’s one word for it,” said Virgil.

Genevieve ran out of the house and let the screen door slam. She’d gotten a perm and it must have been recent because the curls bounced in Shirley Temple ringlets. She tip-toed barefoot over the walking stones and stopped a few feet behind her father, one arm wrapped around her back and holding the other. The girls stood behind their fathers as they talked fiberglass insulation and trouble with the gaps around the chimney. The whole family was sleeping in the living room on air mattresses and sleeping bags. Azalea strained to hear her father, his voice a low snarl. Uncle Mike kept talking like everything was normal. She felt almost sorry for him.

“Run along, girls.” Virgil waved his hand for them to disappear.

Genevieve took off to the barn and Azalea trailed her. As soon as they passed the giant maple they had crossed the border of a spell. The sun was burning away the clouds. In the barn it was ten degrees cooler. Beams of sunlight fell upon the floating dust, turning it into gold. The

cousins went to the stall that Azalea had spent some extra care decorating. It was tidy with drawings of rainbows and flowers on the walls framed in popsicle sticks, and curtains from the rag bag were nailed above the windows, a little plastic table from when they were toddlers held a bouquet of Queen Anne's lace in a chipped pink mug.

One side of the gray-wood beamed wall was half-covered in velvet blue and gold threaded wallpaper, some left over from a job Uncle Mike had at a steak house. Azalea touched it. It was fuzzy, and reminded her of the wallpaper in the bathrooms at church. She turned to Genevieve. She couldn't believe Aunt Hilary let Genevieve get a perm. This would not help Azalea's argument for one at all. Aunt Hilary also let Genevieve get her ears pierced for playing so well at her first recital, and let her wear those jelly shoes made of plastic that looked like Cinderella's glass slippers from a distance.

The eight weeks of their separation were marked with chalk by the doorway. Four lines with the fifth across it. Had it really been that many days? Nothing had happened to Azalea, aside from swimming lessons and losing her canines. New ones were growing in like vampire teeth. Genevieve ran around bouncing like a puppy. There was so much they could do it was hard to say where to start. Azalea learned a new card game called Spit while waiting at swim lessons for her mother to pick her up. Genevieve was determined to make the barn look so pretty she wouldn't have to live in the living room anymore in a sleeping bag, but out here on a cot all summer till the new room was ready. They sat down on the crates. "I want to be Helen," said Genevieve. "Who do you want to be?"

Azalea took out the cards from her pocket. She didn't want to be anyone but herself. Eight weeks had passed – that was two months! Long enough for her to see that there was something different about her cousin. It was hard to say what it was. Her turned-up nose and the

little hairs that grew between her eyebrows. The perm that did not look stylish though it should have. How she couldn't just have a normal hideout with crate chairs and binoculars, she had to have her own house with architectural plans tacked the wall. How she couldn't seem to ever choose a name to play house with aside from Helen. "I don't see why you want to pretend to be someone else all the time." Azalea shuffled the cards

"You can be yourself. I want to be Helen."

"Ok then." Azalea snorted the way her older brother did.

Genevieve grabbed the pink mug of flowers and threw it at her. The water landed on Azalea's face and neck but, being a younger sister, she knew to complain that it had gotten in her eye and that her eye stung. When Genevieve said, "I was only playing," Azalea grabbed a fistful of her curls and brought her down to the floor with a loud thunk. Before Genevieve could scramble away, Azalea ran out of barn past the maple up the stone path through the screen door and plopped herself on the couch next to Baby Mike, who had grown a little rat tail at the nape of his neck and was eating a popsicle. He opened his red mouth to say "Hey," and then immediately, "You can change the channel if you want," because he wanted to marry someone like Azalea, who was like a girl, only nice. He was watching *Rescue Rangers*. Azalea liked that show. They sat together watching Scrooge McDuck dive headfirst into a vault of gold coins. Anger had wrapped around Azalea's middle with a python's grip. They watched *Looney Tunes* while their dads went to the hardware store.

Genevieve finally came back from the barn. She stood in the doorway between the living room and kitchen. She was definitely Genevieve now, she stood with her arms crossed. The lights to the living room were off, it was cloudy again and dark as evening. The glare from the

TV cast a blue light over Genevieve, in the moment Azalea could see the person her cousin would look like when she was teenager. Bold with a jaw that was locked tight.

“Shoo,” she said. And Baby Mike bolted outside saying he was tired of TV anyway. Genevieve sat down next to Azalea, and turned down the volume. Then she said in a soft voice, “My name is also Helen.”

Azalea was now willing to concede. “I want to be a Kristin,” she said.

“No, listen,” Genevieve said with frustration. “There’s someone else who lives inside me, and that’s her name.” She sat up. “Can’t you tell?”

Azalea looked at her cousin closely. Genevieve was the quick one, but Azalea was the pretty one. She hadn’t looked closely at her cousin for a while, but she wasn’t unpretty. She had wide-set brown eyes and long eyelashes, and a turned-up baby nose. “You look like a Genevieve to me.”

Genevieve said it was like the *Magic Eye* book at the mall. You had to keep looking till your eyes crossed.

Azalea never saw the image in those 3-D books, but she tried again. She set her gaze to the tip of Genevieve’s nose. Soon she became distracted by the mown-grass smell of her cousin, and the smell of dust from the barn. The corduroy lines on the couch made a cringing sound when you ran your nails across them. The plastic siding loudly flapped on the part of the house that was missing. Azalea tried to play her cousin’s game, because this was a game. Wasn’t it?

“Hello,” said a stranger.

There, in the reflex of being startled, is when Genevieve’s face made another shape. It was like glimpsing the bright scales of fish below muddy pond water, except instead of a fish it was a person’s face on top of Genevieve’s. Like looking into still water on a bright day, it was

hard to see what was the mirror image and what was the fish. The face looked like a grown woman, with round cheeks, deep-set eyes, a thick single brow. She appeared to be concentrating very hard, as if she'd lost something and was looking for it.

“Do you see me now?” asked the stranger. It was Genevieve’s voice but it wasn’t her.

Azalea pressed her back against the couch’s arm. Her heart bucked against her ribs.

Genevieve looked like Genevieve again but this did not offer much relief. She touched Azalea on the knee. Azalea brought her hand to her head. She felt like she had been hanging upside down for too long.

Azalea swallowed. “What was that?”

“That was Helen.”

Azalea touched Genevieve’s cheek with her fingertips. “How’d she get inside your face?”

Genevieve closed her eyes halfway, her long eyelashes like butterflies relaxing on a flower. When she yawned her mouth opened so wide that Azalea could see the white rocks of her molars, the new teeth coming in above the baby ones. She wondered if the other person lived inside Genevieve’s stomach, or between her ears, or where exactly. If someone reached down her cousin’s throat could they pull her out? “Helen’s always been there,” Genevieve said. “Since we were little. Mama doesn’t like it when she comes out.” Once, Genevieve said, Hilary saw Helen’s face and thought she was hallucinating from a fever. The sight gave her such a scare that Hilary caught a virus and didn’t leave the bed for four days. When she got better, she told Genevieve never to show Helen’s face to anyone again.

## Chapter 2: Arcadia, Kentucky 2007

Azalea almost did not go to the cast party/fundraiser/whatever Clive was calling it now. The final performance of *Nonesuch Creek* had not gone as expected. It was a bittersweet that her very last performance as an actor had been her best one, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that she had publicly humiliated herself. She had not cried like that in years, and in a show, never. Her cheek still burned from the slap Emily had given her backstage. And just the thought of facing Clive, the director, gave her a kind of test-taking anxiety that made it difficult to breathe. The experience of the last several hours had left Azalea so disoriented that she passed by the driveway of the house three times. Finally, curiosity got the better of her. She had promised her father she would tell him what The House on Duvall looked like on the inside. It was only recently that she had learned that the house belonged to Clive's stepmother, and she expected that this would explain everything about him.

The House on Duvall was one of those locally famous private homes that people drove out to admire during Christmas. Every year, arriving promptly the day after Thanksgiving, a team of glowing reindeer appeared on the roof. Thousands of white lights framed the eaves and gutters, and nets of them twinkled over the evergreens and the wrought-iron gate. In the lawn of the driveway's roundabout, the homeowners erected a large nativity scene made of a real wood, not plastic. Her parents and dozens of others parked their cars on the side of the road to marvel, making wild guesses at how much the owners paid for electricity during December.

The house opened like a pop-out book. It was larger than it seemed from the outside, with a curved staircase leading down the foyer. To the left was a living room where a portrait of a thoroughbred hung above the fireplace. Small groups of people talked while holding drinks, their voices already half-way to drunk. The women were dressed in the way they always seemed to at these fundraisers, as tall black exclamation marks or floral wallpaper. A few men wore bow-ties in a way that straddled irony and a thoughtful sartorial choice. Azalea realized, with embarrassment, that she was underdressed for the occasion.

She tried not to panic. She kept walking as if she knew where she was going until she found a powder room in a narrow green hallway and dashed inside.

An apple-spice candle burned on the toilet's tank. Her own plain face stared at her tensely from the gold-framed mirror. If she left now she'd have time to change into something fancier and be back before eleven. But if she left now she knew she should would never come back.

She fumbled her bag, hoping to find the lipstick that occasionally floated around the inside pocket. After the show she had dutifully scrubbed off all her stage makeup. Her left cheek, where Emily had slapped her, looked like it had been scrubbed with steel wool. Because Azalea wore heels and a girdle for the duration of the two-hour play, she always changed into the most comfortable clothes she owned afterwards. Today that was a pair of cargo pants with bleach stains and a gray waffle cardigan she had owned since high school.

The lipstick was never in her bag when she needed it. No brush, either. She took her dirty-blond hair out its pony tail, combed her fingers through it, then put it back up again. Her hair was hopelessly tangled. Her jaw was awfully square---like her Uncle Gil's, like a man's. She always wondered if she would have gotten more lead roles in Chicago if her jaw had been more feminine.

Azalea pulled her hair down again, to balance out the jaw.

Then she remembered that she had never been serious about acting, that at most she was a skilled hobbyist, and she pulled her hair back into a messy ballerina bun. One more show around Christmas, and then her acting career was over. This time next year she'd be in law school. It was safe to give no fucks about this party or any of these people, or Emily who had slapped her so hard, or John whose poignant scene she had totally eclipsed by skipping over his lines, or Clive who had somehow drilled his voice into her brain like an evil stepmother.

None of really matters anymore, she told herself, but her face still looked frightened, because it did matter. She did another take in the mirror.

Less frightened, more give-no-fucks.

She exited the bathroom, passing through a narrow green hallway, following the sound of electronic lounge music and the tipsy voices at the rear of the house, determined to introduce herself to strangers and not just the people she already knew.

The back of the house was completely different than the front, a cavernous addition in the style of a ski lodge, with exposed wood beams and unpolished sandstone walls. The tall ceilings blended the music and chatter into a single resounding echo. Azalea's eyes wandered the crowd, searching for anyone she knew.

Arcadia was a small city. If you didn't know someone then you at least recognized them. Azalea took an inventory. The conceptual artist who lived in an old tobacco warehouse and peed in mason jars was talking to an architecture student she had once made out with at a bar, and Julia and Reginald, the two founders of The Local Company held plastic champagne flutes while talking to two elegantly dressed and beautiful older women who were on the board. But there no cast members in sight.

For a dreadful moment, she wondered if she wasn't supposed to be there.

She felt a strange sense of relief came to her when she saw Clive by the large stone fireplace, next to a man with a distinctly out-of-town look. (No one from around here ever wore a scarf that long, looped around their neck that many times.) Clive and the two men squatted by the huge stone hearth attempting to light a fire with the leftover playbills from *Nonesuch Creek*. Tonight had been the final performance.

*Burn them all*, she thought. And then her heart surprised her with a little ache. Her only leading-role playbill, used as tinder. Azalea wasn't sure if she'd even bothered keeping one as a souvenir. Clive rolled the paper into a cone, and held it to the lighter.

#

It had started off so well. She remembered his speech on the first day of rehearsal, the way he had stood in the middle of the circle of the metal folding chairs and told them they were embarking on something remarkable. First of all, he told them, they could not sell themselves short because they were a community theater. They were *not* a community theater. Not anymore. Not with an endowment of two point five million. They weren't even regional. That kind of provincial mindset had to go. He allowed a long pause as this sank in.

He didn't look over their heads as he talked, but found their eyes, taking turns to talk to stare deeply into everyone's. The effect was more intrusive than intimate. She squirmed in her seat when his eyes met hers. But she was going to trust his process and move beyond her discomfort. Emily claimed he was a genius.

Clive graduated to Yale Drama school, moved to L.A., landed memorable supporting roles, then left California. For a decade he lived in Europe and created performance art. Intense weird stuff, Emily had told her: coffins and sleep deprivation and treading water off the Greek

Islands for several days. He came back stateside to direct a theater in a fancy New England resort town, the sort of place where New Yorkers went to admire the leaves in October. Then he came here, back to his home, back to Kentucky. Arcadia, of all places.

The theater, he explained, is not a place. It is the creation of a moment. The physical location was only a context.

Good theater, *powerful* theater, stood outside of physical context. Too often small companies like this one had their ambitions stunted by inferiority complexes. An internalized less-than. A sense of inadequacy. He waved his hand. He'd seen it many times. An obsession with what was happening in the city—it didn't matter what city—New York, Chicago, and places that barely even passed for cities: St. Louis, Milwaukee, Louisville, Las Vegas.

*Fuck New York*, he said.

They all laughed awkwardly. He had struck a nerve. He made them say it aloud. Fuck New York. New York doesn't exist. Only here.

His last point had been less clear, less of a point. Rapture, said Clive. The sublime. He quoted Rumi. He quoted Emerson. Azalea wasn't sure but she thought he may have paraphrased the *Bhagavad Gita*. They were not actors, they were vessels. He spoke beautifully, in a way she would later find impossible to summarize.

A cloudy fuzz formed in the corners of her vision as he talked. Clive appeared into focus. He was forty-something, on the short side, twenty pounds overweight. He looked exactly how you would expect a genius to look, like he was too busy living the life of the mind to spend time on mundanities like haircuts and laundry. His perfect white teeth told of time spent in Hollywood, his sunken eyes told of time spent in rehab. In spite of a pot belly and looking generally unkempt, Clive was dashing. An undeniably good bone structure with a face that could

have been cast in a variety of film roles. The chin of a hero, the cheekbones of a Romeo, the broken nose of a Brando. His eyes were alarming clear blue pools. *Like Rasputin's*, Azalea had thought. She should have left right then. But she had stayed. He seemed to hold the pearl of her own mind in his hands and she longed to hold it herself.

No one moved. They must have felt the same longing as she had, that unnamable desire she had felt nearly all of her life. Then he clapped his hands once. They startled awake. The house grew bright and they rose half-blinded to their marks, tender as warmed clay. Clive could do anything with them now. He could make them.

#

Up the playbill went into a long-tapered flame, smelling of ink and chemicals you probably shouldn't burn indoors. Clive carefully stuck it under one of the logs and blew softly. He hadn't noticed Azalea yet. She sensed there was an exit nearby and fled in that direction. With a party this large, she could easily avoid him the rest of the night. She found a sliding glass door and slipped out onto a deck.

#

The actors were all outside in the expansive backyard, circled around a blazing firepit that had been cautiously placed far away from the wooden deck. The smell of weed and pine smoke wafted through the dry fall air. Gabe played scales on an acoustic guitar and then passed it to that girl Mary Anne, who'd played Viola in last summer's *Shakespeare In The Park*. Everyone hushed. Whenever Mary Anne played people listened reverently – she had a silvery mezzo-soprano voice. Azalea listened for a few moments in the shadows. The song was about a man who had been killed by a train. She always found Mary Anne's signing to be so irritating – her voice was too fine and beautiful for these folk songs. The effect was all wrong, like wearing a

silk dress to chop wood. But everyone was transfixed. Emily leaned on Gabe's knee, Reba sat in a camp chair, her legs drawn into her chest. Everyone looked more earnest than usual. Azalea couldn't stand a voice like that, so beautiful and pure. She liked things that were a little ugly, like herself.

Better to go home. She turned and descended the deck's stairs, and finding a graveled path which she thought would lead back to the main entrance, but instead it led through a downhill thicket and into a clearing.

Azalea could smell the horse stable before she saw it — alfalfa, manure, wood shavings. A bright yellow flood light spread over an empty dressage ring. The horses must have been sound asleep because none of them whinnied as she walked toward the barn, which was much nicer than the decrepit tobacco barn they used to play in a children.

Azalea hardly thought of Genevieve anymore, she had died so many years ago, and they had already been in the process of growing apart. The best future that could happen to a fourteen-year old-tweaker was an extreme version of normal. Had she survived, Gen would probably have three kids by now in one of those subdivisions of gray boxes you pass on the way through Indiana, her talent squandered on giving children piano lessons as a side hustle. She and Azalea would have probably never even talked aside from holidays. If there was nothing to talk about, there was nothing to mourn.

Azalea observed her own cruelty, dismayed. She was like a child shoving a person they wanted to be friends with. She climbed the first board of the fence and swung her legs over so that she was sitting on top of the post. It would have absolutely fine with her if she and Gen never talked again. Gen would have shimmered with life and brilliance and it didn't matter if you lived in a gray box outside of Indianapolis or wherever, or had quotes from Matthew on a

particle board in cursive font in your living room, or never went to college. What a shallow way to value a human being. This awareness of her own burgeoning snobbery was why she returned to Kentucky. She could feel herself wrinkling her nose more and more at the people she'd grown up with. Deep down, she knew, that if Gen had been born with Azalea's advantages, she would have surpassed her in every way imaginable.

Had Gen survived she would have been exceptional. The sort clear-eyed maverick who lived in a redwood tree to stop it from being cut down, and while she was up there, composed the orchestral soundtracks for movies and therapeutic trips on mushrooms. She did, after all, have that charismatic talent to hypnotize people, or at the very least Azalea, who had been easy convince. The face underneath Gen's--she had called it Helen--had looked so real.

A few years after Gen had died, Azalea read about Rasputin in a bookstore. She recognized her cousin's piercing stare in his hypnotic eyes, the light shining through them. He'd been a fraud, but he was a fraud who could stop the prince from bleeding to death. This was enough for the queen to adore him.

A pressure gripped Azalea's chest.

The other face was a secret that Azalea had buried so far away inside her mind that she was afraid to examine it too closely. Young girls were always flirting with the unseen, pointing at shadows in the air and calling it witchcraft, or staring at dark mirrors, or summoning ghosts. Azalea determined that she must have gone crazy as a child, the way that czarina had with Rasputin.

The book reported that before he died, Rasputin had been poisoned, stabbed, shot, and drowned. Sometimes Azalea felt like Genevieve wasn't dead at all. Sometimes it seemed to her that death was a kind of trick.

But she knew this was only her mind playing another trick on her: Gen was dead. Azalea was not. Hoping to avoid her feelings, she slid off the fence post, landing on the plush saw dust. She approached the entrance to the stable, which opened into the paddock.

Clive's stepmother, in addition to loving Christmas, was a serious horse person. The jumps in the paddock were raised five feet. The stable coordinated with the house, white with dark green shutters. The rooster weathervane on top of the cupola creaked and spun in the breeze. Those horses live better than most people, is what her father always said about stables like this. Three alarmed whinnies cried out. She wanted to pet their muzzles and feed them a handful of grass. It was so comforting to know what you wanted and to have it right there, ten steps from where you stood. She looked around. No one was watching. She'd go inside, just to feel their grassy hot breaths.

"Shit," said a man's voice from around the corner.

Azalea stood motionless. She considered hiding but that felt cowardly. Clive came from the other side of the barn, shaking a lighter, holding a joint between his lips. He kept walking till he looked up and saw her. He jumped back a foot, dropping the joint. "Jesus Christ." He covered his chest. "You're a stealth bomber." He picked the joint off of the ground and dusted it off. "I know they've got weed at the party but I'm trying to maintain a semblance of professionalism."

Her heart beat nervously. She had only been alone with him once before, early on when her bike was stolen and he'd given her a ride home. His presence, by itself, made her feel thin as shadow. "I just wanted to see the horses." Azalea nodded to the barn.

He squinted at her. "You got a light?"

"No, I don't really smoke."

"Damn."

“Maybe take the cap off.”

“I forgot you could do that.” Clive took the metal cap off the lighter and a bright yellow flame burst out. Azalea took a step towards the hill. He was about to tell her all the things she’d done wrong. She could feel it coming.

“While we’re out here,” began Clive, “let me just say. That last scene was artful.”

Her shoulders relaxed. Clive was stingy with praise, but when he gave it felt more valuable. He passed her the joint. She inhaled and hoped that her face wasn’t beaming with satisfaction, but it probably was. “Thank you.” Her voice crackled with the smoke.

Almost immediately she felt like she was floating up from the ground.

They stood side by side, the paddock in front of them. The sawdust had a violet tinge in the floodlight.

“You want to talk about what really happened up there?” He turned his head to her, and looked solemn.

Her throat was closing up from the smoke. “I did what you suggested,” she coughed. “It worked.”

“You never do what I suggest,” said Clive.

Azalea rolled her eyes. “That’s not true.” The wind blew and the weather vane spun and groaned. It had gotten colder. She was always mindful of standing in a power pose when talking to Clive—standing wide, hands placed on hips—but the cold made her hunched over, her arms crossed at her chest.

“I know that you don’t have much in terms of training. I’m here largely because I don’t think training is all that essential. However — and this is a big however — you should know by now that an emotional breakdown on a stage is not the same as acting.”

Blood rushed to her face. She had almost believed everyone backstage, congratulating her on what a good job she'd done. Now their compliments felt like pennies thrown into a dry well.

“It’s my fault because I’m the one who suggested the dead loved one — I mean, I was half-joking. But whatever you were thinking of,” he asked the joint. “And I won’t pretend or ask what you were thinking of. But whatever it was, it’s not a tool you can actually use unless you want to blow yourself up. You won’t have anything left if you do that. You’ll fucking exhaust yourself. So you’ve got to figure out something other than histrionics. Or you’ll burn out.” He snapped his fingers for effect but they made no sound.

The blood pressure of the world lowered. She was stoned. “I know I don’t have a lot of training. But I think I could get there next time with more control. I mean, I know it wasn’t controlled, but it moved people.” Was she making any sense? “Anyway. They found it moving. Some people told me so.”

“We can talk about this later in more depth. I’d suggest try using more sympathy for the character than say, conjuring your own emotional baggage.” He turned to look at her. In the dim light his eyes looked especially cold. “You’ve been holding onto that joint for a while,” he noted.

She passed him the joint. He was being gentle on her. He could have given the feedback like he did during rehearsal. She was too smart for her own good, without instincts. She was aloof and overly cautious. A dandelion, he called her, a weed. Now she could see why Emily and John lapped up every word. He told them the truth, and the truth could make them better.

#

Maybe everything he had said about her had been true.

She had no business being cast as Lorna Mae, the nineteen-twenties Appalachian whore with a heart of gold, forced into prostitution after her mother died, so riddled by venereal diseases that she's unable to bear children with the man who marries her (a third cousin).

*Nonesuch Creek* was a bad play that had also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983, a maudlin, sentimental tragedy, written by a Californian who had never set foot in the mountains, filled with dialectical inanities that combined the Black vernacular speech of *Porgy and Bess* with the late seventeenth century English of *The Crucible* and the deep southern floridity of Tennessee Williams. (The line she struggled with the most: "I can't abide you getting' kilt whilst the frost is still hard on the ground. Twont be any way to bury you till May.")

At first the feedback process wasn't so bad. Clive pointed out, truthfully, that Azalea was having a hard time committing to the role. She had read too many articles by Appalachian writers and intellectuals who had protested the stereotyping of their region in the play. Acting, he told them, was more instinct than intellect. It was about the body. But with everyone rehearsal, his feedback became more cutting.

*She's damaged, he told her, and you're obviously damaged in some way. Or: You look like an Amazon, but you act like a dandelion.* On more than one occasion, he rubbed his temples as if she'd induced a migraine. *I can't believe I'm saying this. But can you act some more, please?* And worst of all, the one that stung the most with its accuracy: *You probably took acting lessons as a kid because your speech therapist thought it would help you with that lisp.*

Azalea had not spoken with a lisp since she was nine years old, but after a grueling rehearsal that lasted past midnight, her "ssss" rolled out of her mouth like a "th." Clive's powers of observation were so perceptive that he was able to accurately guess her childhood shame.

It wasn't only her he berated. It was everyone. But the others took it like it was gospel, like he was giving them the precious gift of viewing themselves, and their dark unknown recesses. He warned them he would tell them things they didn't want to hear.

Emily couldn't scrub off her private-school demeanor to play a low-class whore. She was frozen. Frigid even. The kind of girl who doesn't orgasm till she's thirty.

John had a terrible laugh, like the vampire Count from the famous children's program.

Gabe gave a musical theater performance. He was more fit to be a tour guide at Disneyland than a stage actor.

Rachel was a golden retriever, desperate to be loved. She needed to tap into her parents' neglect more.

By the end of rehearsals, Azalea was only one left he hadn't cried or stormed out cursing. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep her mouth shut. She crossed her arms and pinched the meat behind her elbow. The closest she ever came to shedding a tear was during fittings for dress rehearsal. Her main costume was a tight-fitting girdle under a V-neck silk slip that plunged down her cleavage. She had matronly d-cup breasts that came in late at age fourteen, and throughout high school she'd worn t-shirts over her bathing suits. The rest of her was shaped like a rectangle, no ass to speak of, not much in the way of hips either. She was worried about one of her nipples falling out, so she taped band-aids over them before walking on stage. There was a moment of whistling and silly tiger growls from the other women and the show's two gay boys. When you had big tits you learned to own them or else they owned you. She tossed her hair over her shoulder playfully, walking upstage to where Clive sat in the front row. He looked her up and down. "Azalea has got those Patti Smith boobs," he said. "Like it's kind of a surprise when you see them." Her face grew hot. She looked around. Everyone was laughing into their hands,

including Emily. The reference was such a nod to coolness, to art school and androgyny. Since age fourteen her breasts had been the subject of conversation. Men brushed up against them at parties, at laundromats, on the El in Chicago, in lines waiting for bars. She had gotten used to it and then at some point realized that getting used to it had deadened her to a kind of delight in her own body. She would not allow it.

Clive was an easy target for a comeback—that unwashed hair, that belly, that weight. He practically had tits of his own. That overly treated white smile that was nearly blinding, that bad breath like an old person’s or a diabetic’s. His career move to Kentucky, she had begun to suspect, was not as intentional as he had claimed. At that moment, she couldn’t think of anything to say. So she gave him the finger. He did nothing but grin and tell her she needed to lighten up. She’d never expand her emotional range if she kept up that rigid attitude.

Each night after rehearsals, she drove home, changed into her running clothes, and sprinted around the block until she tasted metal in the back of her throat.

#

“One more thing. I was thinking.” He inhaled, and spoke while holding the smoke in his lungs. “I know tonight was the last night — but you know it’s hard to not to obsess about what you would have done differently. Anyway, I should have had you singing or humming a church song while she washed the clothes. To get a sense of her faith. It must have slipped my mind.”

“I’m glad you forgot to ask,” Azalea said. “I can’t sing to save my life.”

He snorted. “Anyone can carry a tune. You know ‘Amazing Grace’?”

“We’re sort of like, Christmas-Easter Presbyterians. So not really but kind of?”

He squinted his eyes, and made a come-here movement with his hands. “Let’s hear it.”

“I’ve been smoking.” She went hoarse. “And you know, how this was the final performance?”

“Let’s just try it,” he told her. “I’m trying to get the Board to let us squeeze in another production for May. And a friend of mine who lives up in Vermont wrote a play I’m really keen on. You’d be great for the lead female, but you’d have to sing a little.”

Azalea would be packing up to leave for law school by June, but was so flattered to be considered for a lead that she stood up straight and took a deep breath. She started too high on the first note. They both laughed. She cleared her throat and began an octave lower. Clive moved his hand up for her to grow louder. Azalea had the sudden, paranoid feeling that this was all being secretly recorded, and he had led her into some kind of practical joke. It was the pot, making her paranoid. Her heart skipped fast and irregular. As he stood there moving his hand up and up, she realized that she had been intimidated by him, since the beginning. She longed for it, this power. He could raise his hands and make her sing. The song tickled the roof of her mouth. She couldn’t feel her diaphragm, so she sucked in air. She got to *I once was lost* before he raised a hand for her to stop.

“That’s plenty.” He chuckled. Then he held the back of his hand to his mouth, laughing in the unhinged way that high people do. “What’d you do to your voice, girl? Scream in a pillow? Damn.”

Azalea bit her lip and let out a weak laugh. “I told you I can’t sing.” She wanted to curl up inside herself and never come out. The pot heightened her senses. Twigs broke close to them, an opossum or a deer in the trees. Or maybe someone was listening to them talk. She smelled his sour breath mixed in with the weed and cigarettes.

Clive continued to laugh. He bent over laughing, and as he was bent over he extinguished the joint on the ground. Then stuck it in the pocket of his denim jacket. “I’m sorry.” He brought his fist to his mouth, still laughing. “You and Emily were miscast. You should’ve been the whorehouse madam. With a voice like that. Like a sex phone operator.” He coughed and wiped his eyes.

A hot wave flushed her. Clive lit a cigarette. The smoke drifted into her face. A pressure formed behind her eyes, and then between her ear and her jaw. Was she going to cry? Shit. She was going to cry. She was the only one who hadn’t cried! She couldn’t cry now. Even after she erased her lisp people continued to tease her about her voice — how it was low and rusted sounding, as if she had gargled with rocks. *If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were a dyke*, said one girl on her cross-country team, with a smile like Clive’s.

Azalea had told Genevieve about it. Genevieve cocked her head and raised her eyebrows, and asked, completely sincere. *You know where she lives? I’ll kick her ass for you.* By then her cousin had acquired a group of pony-tailed friends who wore shorts cut-off at the indentation of the inner thigh. They complained loudly about their leaking tampons, bragged about getting their cherries popped, said *fuck* like a form of punctuation. It was around this age that Uncle Mike had given Genevieve and Azalea his one solid piece of advice, the week when Baby Mike had been suspended from school for fighting. *If you ever have to fight, make sure it’s a clear win, and you’ll never have to fight again.*

The feeling of humiliation passed. Her thoughts stilled. She wasn’t exactly sure how to win but it would come to her. She would improvise.

Azalea took the cigarette from Clive’s hand. Her cheeks filled with smoke. When she opened her mouth unbroken smoke rings sailed towards Clive and broke apart at his face. She

stepped towards him and said in a low voice “I bet you call those sex phone operators a lot. Don’t you, Clive?”

He snorted. She could see the whites of his eyes, the red veins.

“What do you talk to them about?” Her throat softened. The cigarette balanced lightly between her forefinger and middle finger, and she brought it to her lips. Her mouth was her best feature, plump, heart-shaped. Women paid a small fortune for a mouth like hers. She made him glance at it. “What do you ask them to do?”

He grinned, and his white teeth nearly glowed in the dark. “Alright, Lorna Mae. That’s enough.”

She was close enough to feel the steam of his breath. She sensed that his face was flushed, a vein in his neck bulging. But she hadn’t swung at him yet. He seemed to watch her from the middle of his brain, waiting to see what she would do. What he didn’t know about her broken voice was that she could pour honey over it. She couldn’t sing but she could make a skull vibrate, like a low organ chord humming the air.

“I dream about you some nights, Clive.” She kept his gaze on the lower v of his face. If she looked him in the eyes she’d stop believing herself.

His jaw slackened and his lips parted slightly. She edged closer and closer, her chest sweeping up against his denim jacket. His exhale brushed her face.

“Let me tell you about my dream.” She licked her lips. “I dream I fuck you up the ass with this giant cock I’ve got.”

He stopped breathing.

“And if you ever talk to me like that again, I will fuck you, Clive.” She whispered. “I will fuck you so hard you won’t be able to take a shit without thinking of me.” She pulled his jacket

collar and pressed her lips against his rough cheek. He stumbled backwards. Azalea did not wait. She turned and walked towards the path, her hands shaking with a dark, rushing strength. A song played in her head about a man who murdered his wife. Perhaps she had it in her to kill someone, but she'd never have to. Not her. When she got to the trees she ran. She flew up the hill in the near pitch darkness, feeling the roots of the trees underfoot, moving so fast she couldn't fall. Up and up she flew. Nothing could hurt her.

#

She always had trouble in her last scene, where Lorna Mae tries to stop William from taking revenge on the man who they sold their mineral rights to, unknowingly signing away a coal seam that would have made them wealthy but instead ruined their small plot of farmland. Clive had given her a note, even though he wasn't sure why he should bother anymore. And she wasn't sure either. She could never get the emotional timbre of the scene right. (That ridiculous line: "I can't abide you getting' kilt whilst the frost is still hard on the ground. Twont be any way to bury you till May.") Clive had scratched his head.

"Not operatic," he told her, "but let it spill over some. The moment of catharsis is a sort of sadomasochist release."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." She frowned. All of his metaphors were sexual and lamely bookish.

He sighed. "Just do that trick they tell you to a theater camp, where you imagine someone you love lying dead."

It was cheap way to summon tears. But what the hell, she thought. This was her last night.

When the moment came, Azalea conjured the image of her beloved family dog, Chaplin, and the day in high school when she found him run over in a ditch by her parents' property. She still considered it one of the worst days of her life, and she wondered if this was because she hadn't lived much and had an easy middle-class existence. Chaplin was still alive when she found him, his spine so broken that his back legs seemed to be sliding off the rest of his body. She remembered his weight as she tried lifting him into the back seat of her car, but he was too heavy. She sank down into the weeds with him and sobbed. His eye cracked open and he looked at her confused. She noticed, with horror, that some of his intestines had fallen out of his anus when she attempted to lift him. It had never been so clear to her that a body was a thing that was made and unmade. If only she had a zipper and could zip his insides back up where they belonged. She stroked his floppy ears, and felt his life move away, a fish sliding from her between her hands. Her dear friend who had given her so much comfort when her cousin died was now dead. Azalea had never told the whole story to anyone, she had kept it hidden and locked. Usually just the thought of it made her eyes water.

But not today, not when she needed to cry. The moment would not unlock itself, would not allow her to use it. She panicked. Azalea heard herself say the line, "Revenge is mine, sayeth the Lord, I shall repay." Something was off. Gabe blinked.

Azalea had skipped a line. Maybe two. Maybe ten.

She was no longer embodying Lorna Mae, she was just Azalea in a girdle.

Gabe carried on. Azalea, for the life of her, could not summon grief.

There was only a dull sadness she strained to notice. It was always there, a bracelet on her arm that first felt heavy and then was forgotten. William told Lora Mae it would be alright.

Now, now, she commanded herself. And then her cousin Genevieve, dead for ten long years, arrived in her thoughts.

Gen must have weighed ninety pounds in her coffin.

White polyester came down to her ankles, a lace collar with neat little rosebuds. A dress fit for a little girl, not a fourteen-year-old who had run away from home and never come back. There were too many lilies. The smell was cloying, it covered another smell.

That was Azalea's worst day of all and she never thought about it. She never allowed herself to, or else the mammoth crushing feeling would descend, and she would be pounded and rolled over inside its wave.

Here it came.

Lorna Mae grabbed William's sleeve. "Please don't leave me here. What'll I do?" That wasn't a line at all. "I won't even be able to dig you a grave. The ground won't thaw out till May." She collapsed, the floor bruising her knees.

Mucus ran into her mouth. Her voice drowned in saliva, she gulped her air between her lines.

William looked at her, growing stoic. Unreasonable woman. Of course he'd come back alive, of course he would. He kissed her on the forehead, not the lips.

When the curtains drew, Azalea covered her mouth and hurried off stage. She sat down on a bale of hay from Act I. The girdle tightened around her navel, her breaths shallow and quick. Involuntary bursts of memories fired off in her brain. She couldn't breathe. Gen's dangly globe earrings, her yellow dresser, her shirt covering her face as she hung upside down from a tree branch, the melodies she'd improvise on the Casio, the tire swing full of rain and mosquito

larvae. That strange game they would play together, when it looked as if there was another face living beneath her cousin's. Helen.

Azalea couldn't stop. Ugly sounds came out her, loud hiccups. She bent over and buried her face in her knees.

Emily, happy to play the hero whenever one was needed, rushed to Azalea's side and told her she was having a panic attack. "Deep breaths," Emily whispered. Backstage was an echo chamber. A sneeze rang out like a thunder storm. Azalea's sobbing could be heard in the house. Act V had started. Clive strode over from the curtain with a finger to his lips. He drew Azalea up to standing. Calm yourself, he mouthed. There was a grizzle on his jawline and his fingers dug into her arm. He was old enough for his years to carry the weight of authority.

Azalea nodded, but another sob escaped her. She hadn't cried at the funeral. It was so embarrassing, all that weeping and moaning from the adults. Aunt Hilary had flung herself over the casket as the pallbearers carried it down the church aisle. The corner landed on the floor with a hard thud, the body rolling inside.

Clive turned to Emily. "Slap her."

"What?" Emily looked stunned.

"Do it," he said.

A sting landed across Azalea's face, followed by numbness then burning.

"That was too hard," Azalea hissed.

Emily put a hand over her mouth. "I am so sorry," she whispered. "I am so, so sorry!"

Clive placed a hand on Azalea's back and moved her closer to the stage. They stood watching by the curtain. He breathed next to her, chewing mint gum, holding her arm, holding her up, she realized. A shot went off. William was dead. Azalea felt the ground beneath her feet

and counted the length of each exhale. The curtains fell and the audience applauded. Gabe – who played dead William so well that Clive often said he wished his living performances could be just as convincing – stood up, straightened his shirt and walked towards them.

“Smile,” Clive commanded. Azalea smiled and Clive put her hand into Gabe’s. The pair walked on stage with the rest of the cast. The lights blistered her vision. The audience looked half-formed in the darkness, sitting within the otherworld. Their applause was noticeably more enthusiastic than normal. A few dog whistles pierced the air. Azalea’s face ached with a smile as she held Gabe’s sweaty hand and bowed. Everyone stood up. It was not a polite dozen. It was not just the subscribers and the family members, it was everyone. A mouse, terrified by the clapping, scurried under the rail of the orchestra pit. Azalea knew she was not a great actor. Whatever happened just now, it did not belong to her, it rose above her own meager ability. She didn’t want to leave. The theater was such a stupid way to spend the precious minutes of your short life. She would miss it terribly. The hours she spent fighting with her mother to let her add on the theater major, the run-throughs in dimly lit hallways, the feeling, when it was going well, of being a child playing make believe, the touchy-feeliness of the people—someone was always grabbing your elbow or looking into your eyes wanting to connect, wanting to be seen but also wanting to see you. Tears rolled down her face. She waved to her father who stood in the front row, blocking everyone’s view and yelling *bravo* like it was the goddamn opera and not a corny little theater in the state’s second largest city. A rain of applause. What a fitting cliché. The rain drenched her and her smile no longer hurt her face. She hadn’t known she was so thirsty. Was it really hers? Could she have it again and again every night forever?

#

Azalea slowed down when the campfire came into view. She stood at the edge of the trees, catching her breath, listening to the tinny acoustic guitar, the pop and snap of water in the burning logs. Nauseated and dizzy, she bent over and placed her hands on her knees. What had she done? What about that role in June, the one she should have been perfect for? She could barely stand. She wanted to lie out on the grass but that would draw attention, so she forced herself upright.

No one noticed when she sidled around the campfire, around the corner of the house to the front doors. She passed through them again, like a brand-new guest arriving late. The blood felt like it had fallen out of her head and to feet. There was music in here too, coming from the library or parlor or whatever it was rich people called their third living room. Lydia played piano while five or six people sang at once. They sang without inhibition or a sense of shame. The singing was remarkably good, tonally clear, every note a circle drawn by a compass. *If I was a wealthy man!* By now Azalea felt too sick to feel annoyed. She walked straight through the crowd, invisible under the cloud of song.

It occurred to her that there was no way that she could drive home in her current state.

An hour was all she'd need to come down. She went to the appetizer table and stacked a pyramid of dolmas onto a paper plate, unable to make friendly eye contact with anyone. Her heart was still running up the hill. In the kitchen she filled a red plastic cup full of tap water and drank it in one gulp. She stood for a moment in the corner, staring at the knives attached to a magnetic strip above the counter. They were the same brand her high school boyfriend sold after he graduated and cost as much as a used Honda. She drank a beer and felt more unwell, as if she had surgery and hadn't been completely sewn up right.

“Azalea!” Emily stumbled into the kitchen, throwing her arms around Azalea’s neck. “You were just brilliant, dah-ling.” Emily was tipsy and speaking in a British accent, a hybrid of Eliza Doolittle and the BBC News Hour. She stood back and examined Azalea’s face with her eyes. “I’m so sorry about the smack. It did leave a mark.” Emily winced and said in her normal voice. “I’m so sorry.”

Her observation reminded Azalea of the mild stinging pain she’d felt all night. Azalea brought the cold beer to her face. “It’s quite alright, dah-ling.” Azalea’s British accent was more dowager countess. “These sorts of things are unavoidable in the heat of performance, you know.”

A marijuana-induced uneasiness spread like pins and needles across Azalea.

“Do you want to slap me?” Emily asked. “For revenge? Here, just do it fast—” she turned her cheek. “I’ve had so much to drink I’ll barely feel it.”

Azalea didn’t laugh. “It’s fine, really.”

Emily raised her eyebrows. “Are you feeling okay? You look pale.”

“I think I may have smoked too much weed.”

“Oh honey,” Emily said. “Any weed is always too much weed for you.”

Azalea nodded. She had a sudden, desperate urge to confide in Emily about what just happened with Clive – she and Emily had once been close, or something like it.

It occurred to Azalea that Emily would know how to fix things with Clive. Emily always responded so breezily to Clive’s feedback, even though he sometimes left her in tears. That feeling of woundedness is a sign of progress, Emily told her. A sign that he was cutting through the layers of bullshit.

Azalea grabbed her hand, pulling her closer so that no one might hear. “You have to help me,” her voice cracked. “I just fucked things up with Clive. Big time.”

#

After graduating from college, Azalea had moved to Chicago with her best friend Tanya, where she spent three years performing in non-Equity productions and landing roles that didn't have real names. (Prostitute Number 3, Scientist, White Girl, Waitress, Wounded Alien, Second Valkyrie, Teacher.) Emily, meanwhile, had thrived in Arcadia's local theater scene. She had never left Kentucky, not even for college, and she always seemed to be landing roles as ingenues named Samantha. It had been Emily who had persuaded Azalea to move back to Kentucky. And yet when Azalea returned home, the rift in their friendship had been almost immediate. Azalea didn't know what to credit the tension to, other than the difficult material of *Nonesuch*. Although, Azalea suspected that Emily's acquiescence to Clive was the sign of something deeper.

One night, Azalea forgot her phone at the theater. She found Emily sitting on Clive's lap in the office, twisting a piece of his hair. Emily stood up and explained they were just rehearsing the scene in Rose's bar. Azalea pretended she was convinced, and found her phone between the sofa cushions. The next rehearsal was the one when Clive told Emily she ought to buy a vibrator because it was obvious she'd never had an orgasm. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Azalea snapped. And Clive explained calmly, that since Emily was playing a whorehouse madam who was instructing her girls on how to fake an orgasm, an experience with real orgasm was essential.

Emily had stood very still, her cheeks flushed. "I guess it's pick-on-Emily day." She sighed and wrinkled her nose. Later when Emily gathered her things, Azalea asked if she was okay. Emily's head shot up. "Why would I not be okay?" She laughed. She had spent a year

abroad, in France. Everyone flirted with everyone there, it was part of the joy of being alive. Azalea started to say that she didn't think speculating on a cast members sex life was flirtatious?

Emily breezed through the door. Azalea slouched behind, worried she had come off as prudish. This is different, she wanted to say, but stopped herself. There was a strange feeling lurking beneath her disapproval, a glare of envy that Emily had been sitting on Clive's lap – not that Azalea wanted this form of attention, but she wanted something from him. Attention from Clive was moonlight on the skin, it could transform you into a nocturnal, fawnish creature.

#

If she was going to survive the next few months at The Local Company, Azalea would need Clive back on her side. Emily looked at her with interest, her pupils so dilated that Azalea realized she also was high.

"I just screwed up an opportunity," Azalea whispered, unsure if she should be worried or this was all simply a THC induced paranoia. "I may have insulted Clive. Like really badly?" She covered her mouth. "*Very* badly."

"What did you say to him?"

Azalea tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry. "I told him off." She took a sip of beer. "It was pretty graphic."

Emily brought her fingers up to her nose as she laughed. "Oh Zalie," she rolled her eyes.

Just then, three men with salt-and-pepper hair came into the kitchen, talking about the best way muddle mint leaves. They proceeded to scavenge the cabinets for a mortar and pestle.

"Where are my manners." A man with glasses turned around. "Ladies, would y'all like a mojito?" His eyes darted to another painting of a horse that hung above the kitchen table. "Or perhaps a mint julep? In honor of Secretariat over there?"

Emily perked up. “One mojito for me, sir, one for Lorna Mae.”

“I thought you looked familiar,” said the man holding the rum. The three men unanimously praised them, and moment later, Azalea found herself downing a mojito, remembering *liquor after beer* only after she’d emptied her glass. Everyone gave their names. Azalea forgot them almost immediately.

“I’m one of those yokels who’s rather see a movie than a play,” said the man with glasses. He talked with an accent that was more country than the others. “So I don’t know a thing about the theater, but I found your character heartbreaking.” Azalea recognized him as the owner of the bakery on Lime Street, where she sometimes bought muffins before going to her receptionist job at the law firm. He didn’t seem recognize her. “That last scene.” He shook his head. “It brought me tears. I never cry.”

“It’s true,” said the man in a green sweater. “He never does.”

“The crying?” Emily cackled. “Oh my god, I had to smack her backstage to get her to stop! Like literally smack her in the face.” She brought the drink up to her lips and gave Azalea a side glance. The resentment in her eyes was only visible for a moment, Azalea wasn’t even sure. Maybe she was just seeing things.

The men laughed politely.

Azalea felt the bottom of her heart fall away, but she smiled and said the whole thing had gone way too method. They laughed in earnest this time and Azalea changed the subject. She loved the zucchini muffins at the bakery. The owner’s eyes lit up with recognition. He didn’t know who Azalea was without her office clothes, but she ought to come in and say hi on Wednesday mornings when he was there. Emily threaded her arm through Azalea’s, and together they walked out of the kitchen. Emily’s weight on her shoulder grew heavier and heavier, and

Azalea wondered if she wasn't playing up the drunkenness a little, so that she could say whatever she wanted without the accountability of sobriety.

Emily wasn't really Azalea's friend, but it seemed like a good idea that they go on pretending, at least for another hour, which was the length of time Azalea felt she needed to both sober up and come down.

Emily held Azalea's hand and led her across the room, her hips sashaying beneath her fuchsia wool mini skirt. She was pretty, dark hair, doe-eyed, with a high bridged nose that would have been too large on any other face. Azalea could feel herself being used as a prop, as it sometimes happened with frou-frou girls when Azalea was at her most tomboyish. The room watched as they made their way to the large sliding glass doors. The latch was difficult to open. "Shit," said Emily. They both tried it. The architecture student that Azalea once made-out with leaned over and undid it for them. She wished she was better with names. His bashful eyes caught hers and he turned bright red.

"Thanks, love!" Emily blew him a kiss.

"Pete!" Azalea remembered his name. "I still have your book! *The Poetics of Space*! It's in my car." She raised her free hand. "I'll go get it right now." She unwrapped herself from Emily's arm and wove her way through the crowd to the front door where she exited onto the porch, grasping onto the rail as she descended the stairs. She staggered down the driveway. Her car was parked at the far corner of the lot, partially hidden beneath a maple that hadn't lost its leaves yet.

Azalea opened the trunk and leaned over to grab the book. Then she vomited all over it.

#

Twenty-five was too old to get sick at a party. It was a blessing, really, that she had thrown up in her trunk and not on the grass for everyone to see. Someone would recognize the badly scratched Toyota Camry as hers. She left the vomit-soaked book where it was and went back inside the house. She needed to lie down for a minute.

Upstairs she stood face to face with a large portrait of a man in a double-breasted suit with a white mustache. The singing from downstairs turned into laughter and a stumbling Clair de Lune. And then it sounded like the piano players switched, someone was improvising on Nina Simone's "Four Women" and they were astonishing. Virtuositic, like Gen. Two windows with gauzy curtains looked over the glowing front lawn. At first, she thought the light must be coming from a lamp outside but it was a full bright moon. She walked to a half open door and peered in. A bed was piled high with coats. She thought about lying on top of them but people would grab their coats eventually, so she wandered down the hallway, going around the corner. The hallways seemed like it might go on forever, but it ended at a small door with a few steps leading up to it. She wondered if it was a closet. As soon as she opened it, she could tell it was a stairwell leading into attic. There was the signature attic smell of unvarnished wood and dust. She fumbled the wall for a light switch.

Band posters from the eighties were plastered on the walls of the attic's stairwell. The Stooges. The Clash. David Bowie. The Cure. And her Uncle Gilbert's band, The Nancy Darlings. Azalea had the same poster in a shoebox with his postcards. It was a Xeroxed photo of her uncle with a six-inch mohawk, screaming into a microphone. Someone had taken a red pen and drawn tiny butterflies escaping from his mouth. She remembered Gil and his friends playing in the shed by their house, recording themselves on her father's dictation device. The songs made

no sense to her, except the one that was called “Ronald Regan Has A Tiny Dick.” It was a far step away from Gil’s later taste for symphonic pop music.

What were The Nancy Darlings doing in the attic of this fine house? Posters curled on the edges revealing yellowed tape. A few others were brown with mildew stains. This was puzzling. A shiver ran through her.

Yesterday Uncle Gil had called up her father for the first time in years. It had been so long since they’d heard from Gil that everyone had to pause to do the math. Nearly twenty. Gil had admitted himself to a recovery program in New Mexico and had stayed long enough to arrive at the part where you called everyone you had hurt. Because her father valued mercy over judgment, because he believed in forgiveness, because he believed in the power of a twelve-step program, because he believed in family even when that family had stolen thousands of dollars from your bank account and had probably been high while he babysat your daughter, her uncle was now coming home for Thanksgiving. Which was a week from now. She had scoured herself for mercy and hadn’t found any. Also, Gil had only bothered calling Virgil, not her, whom he had hurt in the terrible way you can hurt a child who adores you. She flipped off the lights switch and shut the door as the attic went dark.

Her ears rang with a low dial tone. She had to lie down. The bedroom left of the attic looked like it was the master suite. The end table held La Mer face cream and a pair of bifocals. The bed was neatly made with three rows of blue pillows with gold tassels. This would take just a moment. Azalea turned off the light and lay on her side. If anyone came for her she would say that she was feeling unwell, which was true. But whenever she felt unwell there was a part of her that wondered if she was lying just to get out of acting like a normal person. The digital clock read twelve fifteen am. Half an hour. That was all she needed to sober up.

#

She woke up with a start, her skull pounding. Behind her, a headboard banged against the wall in the other room. Azalea put her hand over her mouth and stifled a laugh. In seconds the banging ended with an androgynous moan. Azalea fumbled in the dark for her shoes and coat, grabbed them, and tip-toed downstairs. It felt an hour or so before dawn, the sky was turning from deep navy to violet. There were times in the very early morning hours that she felt more awake than any other time in her life. Campfire smoke lingered in the air, the temperature had dropped, the frost on the grass crunched beneath her feet. Only three cars remained on the lawn. Her own, tucked away at the very far edge of the yard behind the low stone wall, and Clive and Emily's, both parked in the roundabout. She covered her mouth—Emily would do anything to get ahead.

An ugly word formed in her mind, a word which she didn't believe in. It was the word of a jealous person and Azalea was certain she was not jealous. She had no desire to sleep with Clive. He was a mean, small man. And with that breath of his — as if meanness rotted him on the inside. She didn't want to sleep with him, she only she wished that he would transform her. And now Emily was allowing herself to be transformed while Azalea had refused.

She tied her shoes quickly. None of it was her business. She would keep their secret. If the others knew they would pretend not to care in order to appear open and liberated, but secretly they would judge Emily, which Azalea was trying not to do right now. Emily did exactly what she wanted because she was free. You had to respect that, you had to admire it.

### Chapter 3

Emily called early Monday evening just as Azalea was leaving the law office. “I’m dying.” Her spoke in a rasp, the kind of voice you’d use to play an evil queen or a talking oak tree. She’d come down with the strep and had laryngitis and was running out of supplies. Since they lived just three blocks from each other she’d been wondering—

Of course! Azalea stopped her before she could even ask. Of course! She was thrilled to be useful. Text me whatever you need, she told Emily, who hadn’t been aware there was a function on their phones where you could text. Azalea drove straight to the Walgreens. Theraflu, Nyquil, cough drops, a trashy magazine, a twelve-pack of orange Gatorade which she would split in half, six bottles for her hangover and six for Emily’s flu. She parked her car back at her own apartment, deciding to walk to Emily’s, to cut down on emissions, even though the weather was looking bad, with descending clouds, fat and gray. She was eager and nosy to hear how it had been with Clive. They would talk about men. It’d been so long since Azalea had talked about men with anyone.

Emily was the sort of woman who liked toxic men. They were at least interesting, Azalea had to admit. An attraction to them was probably unhealthy. It probably revealed some kind of deep childhood wound you had to work out. And wasn’t the attraction to toxic men—especially those who were older, with more power—simply a kind of internalized desire to escape patriarchy? A sublimated desire *to be* the men, rather than just fucking them? She would advise Emily if she wanted advice, listen if she wanted someone to listen, and most importantly, pretend that she didn’t know what had happened if Emily wanted privacy. Regardless of what Emily wanted, toxic men and how to deal with them—how to fuck them without getting fucked over—was an experience which would quietly unite them in friendship if not sisterhood.

Emily opened the door in flannel pajama and a blue hoodie, her hair in a messy top knot, her eyes ringed with dark circles, her lovely high-bridged nose bright red. Within the time it took to say hello, Azalea realized that Emily had no idea that Azalea knew anything. Azalea observed a sinking, lonely feeling as she put the Gatorades into the fridge. She had no close friends in Arcadia. The ones from high school had fled years ago, vowing never to return. The ones who had stayed were already married with babies on the way, having already entered a life that Azalea would not experience for at least another five years or more.

Emily tore open a bag of cough drops and poured them both cups of tea. Despite her hoarseness, she told Azalea details about *The Christmas Carol*. Emily had been cast as Isabelle, Ebenezer's love interest. "This play is so simple compared to *Nonesuch*," Emily's voice lapsed into a whisper.

Azalea sat her mug of tea on the coffee table without drinking it, wondering if Emily was still contagious. The odor of sick person hung around the apartment, of unwashed blanket and eucalyptus.

"I should get going," she said, not wanting to catch anything. Her Uncle Gil was coming to town next week, she explained. "I mean, he's my uncle but really he was more like my long-lost brother, you know? I haven't seen him in years, he had this successful career as a music producer but then he got way to into coke. And anyway—" Emily's eyes were glassy. "I should get going," Azalea repeated.

"You should have auditioned for this one," Emily whispered. "I wish you had." Everyone was getting along so well, and Joanne, the director, was simply adorable. Way more nurturing than Clive. "It feels cozy. Like a summer camp." Emily stood up to get the door. "Totally your

speed. Joanne gives you feedback in a compliment sandwich.” She thanked Azalea for the cold medicine and trashy magazine and blew her an air kiss.

Half-way down the stairs, Emily’s remark began to sting. Azalea wasn’t a summer camp kind of actor. She didn’t need “compliment sandwiches,” like a child. She was the only person who hadn’t cried in the whole cast! The walk back to her apartment was bitterly cold. Why did she feel like she had lost a competition? She hadn’t even been aware that they had been playing a game. If that was the way it was going to be, then she wasn’t sure she wanted to be friends with Emily at all. The only reason why Azalea even liked the theater to begin with was the comradery, because she’d been a shy, average kid with a mild speech impediment, then an alienated teenager who was bad at making friends because she thought about death all the time. It was hard to think about death when you were playing improv games. She should go back, knock on Emily’s door, and tell her if she wanted to spend her life on the regional theater path – first the ripe ingenue, then the neurotic mother, then the insignificant old biddie – it was perfectly fine. Good luck with the rest of your life, living and acting and dying in the same town you were born in!

Azalea wrapped a scarf around the bottom half of her face. The clouds continued to gather, unusually low slung and heavy across the sky. Her numb fingers struggled with her keys. She turned on the college radio station and changed out of her work clothes. An ice storm was coming.

Ice storms never happened in November, they usually arrived in late February when the weather couldn’t make up its mind to snow or rain and so it did a little of both. The untimely ice storm was sign of the end times, of icebergs melting at alarming rates, of scientific facts ignored. No one talked about this on the news, but her friends did, the crunchy hippie types who

made their own vinegar-based cleaning products. They posted articles about the unseasonable storm along with commentary from climate scientists. Azalea didn't like to think about the destruction of the planet but she did feel excited by the apocalyptic meaning it gave to everything, the sense of urgent interconnectedness.

Her parents called to see if she wanted to drive out to spend the night at the farm. They had a generator, a wood burning stove, two pallets of firewood. She thought they were overreacting. Outside her window, the shape of icy rain pelted through the yellow light of street lamps. The national weather service interrupted the college radio station as she washed dishes in the sink. She felt a tingle of being alive, of being a small person on a large planet in a mysterious universe. As she went to bed she could hardly sleep, she was so curious to see what the storm would leave tomorrow. She turned her phone to silent at the last minute. If Emily's power went out, then fuck her. She'd have to call another friend.

#

Around one o'clock in the morning, Azalea woke up to the sound of a bomb. She leapt out of bed and ran to the window. Another explosion went off. She pressed her cheek against the glass to better view the north end of the street. The world was a strange version of itself, every surface crystalized with thick white ice. A giant tree on the next block was bending under the weight of it. She watched it collapse into an electrical pole, releasing yellow sparks into the air. Streetlights flickered and then one by one, darkened. The nightstand clock radio read three thirty am. Her power was still on. She turned to the window again. The sky was still full of clouds, and a bright moon that glistened almost pink. The trees that were still standing, mostly the evergreens, bent under the weight of so much ice that their branches splayed out on the ground as if a large hand had flattened them. There was enough light to see powerlines crisscrossed in the

middle of the street. Trucks had covered the road with rock salt the day before but it hadn't been enough. The first layer of snow had melted, then frozen solid again, and so the road was covered in what appeared to be the sort of hard frosting you'd find on gingerbread houses.

Azalea returned to bed. Maybe work would be cancelled or at least delayed. Bizarre images flickered on her closed eyelids as if they were a kind of movie screen. She forgot them as soon as she tried to remember them. She was falling asleep. When she woke up again it was because she thought she heard a voice shouting her name from the outside.

The room was even darker than before. She walked barefoot to the window. More streetlights had gone out, but her clock now read four nineteen. Clouds rolled over the moon.

A compact snowball exploded at her window.

A man cried out her name.

She ran downstairs without even putting on socks and peered through the front door. Underneath a hat and a scarf, she recognized Clive's face. She opened the door, but just a crack.

"I tried ringing but it's frozen." Clive pointed a gloved hand to the doorbell, which was covered with ice. Every surface was. The strawberry planter from the summer that had never been put in the basement, the wrought iron handles that climbed up the porch steps, the evergreen bushes crystalized and flattened like pressed flowers. "I would never bother you but my car stalled." He blew his nose into a Kleenex. It had been dripping. "I remembered you lived here."

She opened the door wider. The air was so cold it felt wet on her skin. She didn't hate him so much that she wanted him to freeze to death.

She thought about poor Emily, sick in her apartment, how she had silenced her phone.

Clive raised his hands and walked inside. “I know how you feel. I get it.” He kicked snow off his shoes on the doormat. “I’ve been waiting over an hour for the tow truck and almost got smashed by a tree that fell.” He sniffed. “I wouldn’t have bothered you. But I thought I might freeze. And my phone is dead.”

Azalea had woken up enough by now to feel a sense of speechless embarrassment. She was so certain that she would never see him again. Otherwise she wouldn’t have told him – what did she even tell him? That she dreamed of fucking him up the ass with her giant cock? Her face grew hot.

“Can I use your phone?” He followed her up the steps. “Everything is dying on me tonight. Last Ford I ever buy. Only six years old. Can you believe that shit?”

At least he was making banter. Azalea tried to remember how to make banter. “I have a Honda. Ninety-thousand miles.”

They arrived at the top of the stairs. He took off his boots off before he entered her apartment. The boots were splattered with gray paint, and the same color paint was on his jeans. His socks were thick beige wool. His green puffer coat had snow on the shoulders that was already melting, and he smelled better than he usually did, as though the cold air had cleaned him. He stuffed his hat and gloves and scarves into a single pocket, and hung his coat over the doorknob. They had entered an unspoken agreement where they would pretend that nothing had happened.

“Could I please use your phone?” He asked with a formal politeness.

She retrieved it from her bedroom where it had been charging.

Clive flipped it open. He breathed on his hands. “I can barely feel my fingers.” Then he dialed a number from the back of an insurance card.

“I’m on hold.” He covered the receiver. “Nice pajamas.”

Azalea looked down. She was wearing snowman pajama bottoms that her mom gave her when she was fourteen and a screen-printed t-shirt from college that said *Fuck Your Fascist Beauty Standards*. Her nipples were visible through the white fabric. She crossed her arms.

“Can I bother you for something to drink? Glass of water? Tea if you got it?”

She pulled on hoodie that was draped over a chair and went into her small kitchen. Might as well turn on the kettle. He was talking to someone from roadside service now. They usually arrived within a few hours. He stood in the corner, the snowflakes on his face had melted and his grizzle looked dewy. He appeared wholesome and fresh, as if he’d just come inside after shoveling a driveway.

“What’d they say?”

“They can’t go anywhere till the powerlines are moved.” He rubbed his face on his sleeve. “I’ll walk back to theater and wait there.”

“It’s three miles.”

“I can take the cold for three miles.”

“It’s not the cold you need to worry about. It’s the electrical lines.” As soon as she said she realized he’d have to wait with her. “I don’t want to be personally responsible for your death.”

The tea kettle whistled. She poured hot water into two mugs and asked him if he wanted mint or chamomile. He chose mint and thanked her. There was no getting him out now that he was in his socks. As she steeped the tea bags it struck her how odd it was that he remembered where she lived. He had only given her a ride home once, when her bike had been stolen. It was the second day of rehearsal and she’d still believed in him. Sonic Youth played on the radio. He

had seen them live before anyone knew who they were. He asked about where she lived in Chicago, if Andersonville was getting gentrified yet, but it must have been, since someone like her moved there. He had cracked a smile at this, as if he himself had transcended category. They had talked about the play and why he had chosen it. There was an emotional current that rang true to him. And that emotional truth outweighed the faults of the play, the faux hillbilly accents, the stereotypical violence. She nodded and agreed with everything he said. When he dropped her off at the curb she felt disappointed herself for not performing her intelligence better.

“I’m surprised you remember where I live.” She placed the tea before him on the coffee table.

He blew over the water and sat in the armchair. “I had a friend who used to rent the place below you.”

She sat down on the couch and crossed her legs. Her shirt had a spicy odor to it. She had been sweating in her sleeps and her armpits felt damp. She was nervous. She wanted to go back to her room and lock the door.

“You know, three miles isn’t so far,” he said. “Once I get warmed up, I’ll head out. The office has a cot.” He pointed to a poster behind the sofa. “I like your Munch.”

It was the one of the Madonna, surrounded by orange and red background, her head tipped back in a kind of ecstasy. At one time the painting had struck Azalea as sensual and irreverent. Now she shifted when Clive noticed the painting. She had chosen it for her dorm room when she was eighteen years old. She didn’t like it as much now but wasn’t sure why. And besides, she was getting too old to have posters that weren’t framed.

Clive continued to search the apartment with his eyes. “This place is huge. How many square feet?”

“850.”

He whistled. “We’re paying y’all too much. Never seen an actor with a place like this. No roommates, no roaches.”

“I work at a law firm.” Azalea squeezed her teabag with a spoon and put it on a dish.

“Oh, that’s right.” He tipped up the rim of his mug so that it concealed the lower half of his face. He stared at her so intensely that she wanted to look down, but she didn’t allow herself. She stared back at him. “You have a good eye,” he said, lowering the cup. “I’m very grateful that you don’t want me to freeze to death, even if you do want to fuck me up with ass with a giant cock.” He chuckled.

She could feel herself turn bright red. “I’d been drinking that night, plus the pot—the combination—I wasn’t myself.”

“No, it’s fine. Hilarious, really.” He placed the tea down on the copy of *The Poetics of Space*, which she had just started reading and hoped to return to Pete. “I’m glad this happened tonight, that I ended up here. It’s serendipitous. I’ve had some back pain this year. The medicine I’m taking, plus the pain. I’m more impatient than I usually am, with untrained actors. And I’m sorry for that.” He picked up his tea again. “I believe in candor. I’m afraid my candor might be jeopardizing the whole project, the whole company.”

Azalea sipped her tea and blinked. “I’m not an untrained actor.”

“I meant less-experienced.”

“You’re impatient with everyone,” she used his word, *impatient*. Not her word, *mean*.

“You still want to fuck me up the ass, don’t you?” Clive said.

Azalea's voice cracked with embarrassed laughter. "It's not respectful, Clive, the way you talk to people."

"Some people value honesty," he protested. "I'm not going to sugar coat."

Azalea set her mug down on a coaster. She felt a surge of dread that she was about to get a speech about generational differences.

"I think it's a generational difference." He rubbed his hands. "When I was coming up, that kind of talk was just a way to let out some pressure. It's puritanical, not saying what's on your mind."

"You can be honest while being respectful." This isn't what she intended to say. She had intended to say that his language was demeaning and abusive and objectifying, but if she kept it simple and polite, maybe he would listen.

"I talk to you actor-to-actor. We're on the same footing, like we're equals."

"But we're not equals."

"Look, you're a good actor. And I tried making you a better actor, and I got a little harsh, unintentionally, because of some stupid shit that's going on with me. That's what I meant to say."

Azalea was quiet, wondering why she still felt unsatisfied, if she was not being gracious enough.

"I keep on thinking about that last show," he continued. "It took you the whole season, but you got there, eventually. Even if it was just for one night. You were good. Very, *very* good."

In spite of herself, she warmed with pleasure at this compliment.

“Even though it was an emotional breakdown, or whatever, and it took you a whole season, it was still good.”

She pushed her tongue against the back of her teeth. “Guess I’m just a slow learner. Guess it comes from having big ole Patti Smith tits.” She glared at him.

“Jesus Christ. That’s not what I meant.” He rubbed his forehead and laughed. “You’re not a slow learner. If you’re anything it’s just the opposite. You’re too intellectual. That’ll fuck up your craft if you don’t keep it in check. And that’s not just my advice you know, Uda agrees with me.” He pointed his finger. “And I’ll have you know Patti Smith is a fucking genius with her big tits. Jesus. Being a woman—it’s not—,” he shook his head. “That wasn’t meant to be taken seriously.” He stood up. “I’m ready to go outside and freeze to death. Your generation is so damned sensitive. I’d rather freeze.” He pulled down his sweater, but didn’t move from where he was standing.

“Sit down, Clive.”

He sat back down. She felt a thrill that he did something she told him to do. They sat in silence for a few seconds. He ran his fingers through his hair. It felt like a truce, him listening to her command. Finally, he asked if she want to smoke some pot. He had a little roach in his shirt, maybe two hits left. She didn’t have a bowl, so they hooked a roach to a safety pin like Azalea remembered from high school. They lit the roach over the gas stove, smoked it, and talked about Patti Smith’s *Horses* while the tea kettle heated to a boil. When the kettle shrieked they both jumped in alarm and then cackled. It was exciting, smoking pot with someone who she had once admired. She recalled why she had admired him in the first place. When he relaxed he radiated a warmth everyone wanted to be near to. They sat back down in the living room, he in the armchair and her on the sofa. There was so much honey in the tea, it glided like a syrup

down her throat. Clive crossed his ankle over his knee. She remembered the music posters in the attic of his stepmother's house, and how her uncle's band was among them. "This is kind of random," she said. "But why is there a poster of The Nancy Darlings in your stepmother's attic?"

He laughed. "When on earth did you see my stepmother's attic?"

The tips of her ears burned. "The party. I was looking for a bathroom."

He seemed to consider her answer and thumbed his nose. "That was my sister's room in high school."

"She's got good taste in punk music."

"She did." Clive leaned back in the sofa. "She died when she was nineteen."

"I'm so sorry." This never failed to sound inadequate to Azalea's mind, but she knew it was better than saying nothing.

"We moved everything out of the attic except the posters. She'd glued them straight to the wall." He rubbed his eyelid with his pinky. "You know it's been years since I've thought about The Nancy Darlings." He chuckled. "That is some obscure, deep cut, Arcadia music history. I'm surprised you know who they are. You being just a youngun'."

"My uncle was the lead singer."

He blinked. "Of course, that makes sense. Stuart is your last name. My sister, she—" He reached down and tugged at his sock, then nodded. "They put on a hell of a show. My sister was a fan. Used to turn up the volume so you could hear it downstairs in the kitchen." He grinned. "Pissed off our Baptist parents, I can you that. I remember she took me to an all-ages show of theirs when I was maybe, what, twelve, thirteen. Your uncle played in a sequined dress and combat boots. That must have been the weirdest shit I'd ever seen."

“He was pretty avant-garde, for Arcadia.”

“I hear he went to Europe. How’s he doing these days?”

She curled her legs beneath her. “You remember that Swedish band, The Consonants? He produced them.”

“No shit!” Clive clapped his hands and laughed. “God that’s the last thing I would’ve imagined him doing. They’re about as far from punk as you can get.”

Azalea smiled. “He was a closet dance music nerd. I found all his tapes when he left. A lot of Donna Summers. A lot of Kraftwerk.” She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and rested her head on the couch’s arm. There was more light coming through the window by the table. “His band used to rehearse in our tool shed. He had this one song I wasn’t supposed to hear. ‘Ronald Reagan’s Tiny Dick.’”

They burst out laughing the way people do when they’re high and a thing that isn’t really clever sounds hysterical. Clive’s face crunched up and he laughed silently until he let out a long sigh. “Oh, man. Reagan. He was terrible.” He wiped his eyes. “My parents loved him.”

“Can’t be much worse than what we’ve got now.”

“Bush is an idiot. My parents love him too.”

“He might be the worst in history,” she said.

“Oh, there’s been way worse. Much, much worse.” He listed off various crimes America had committed in the past forty years. Vietnam, the Iran-Contra Affair, Noriega in Honduras. Azalea nodded, feeling tired. He was getting a few details wrong. Noriega was a dictator in Panama, not Honduras, and it was the first Bush who had invaded Panama, not Reagan. She only corrected him once. “Noriega was in Panama, I think.” Actually, she was certain. She had gotten an “A” in Latin American Political Movements at her Jesuit college. When Clive insisted

that it wasn't Honduras she didn't argue. He spoke with such conviction that she doubted herself. A worry crept into her thoughts. What if Clive was only considered to be a good director because he *sounded* convincing? He rarely ever littered his speech *um* or *I think* or even a *maybe*. A heaviness weighed on her as he talked.

She yawned and covered her mouth. "I should go to bed. There might be work tomorrow."

"There won't be work. Not for a couple of days. The city is bound to close."

"You're welcome to sleep on the couch. I can get you a pillow." She slid the blanket off her shoulders.

He looked at her as if he'd just noticed she was there. "Tell me a secret."

She burst out laughing. "Are you serious? No!" She took her tea and drank the last of melted honey at the bottom. When she breathed out the tea mug echoed with a soft white noise, Who did he think he was? A secret. She sat the mug down and folded her legs up to her chest. She thought of Helen's face just then. The way the other face had emerged, as if arising through dark muddy water. For some reason, she wasn't sure why, she felt that if she told Clive about the face he would believe her, even though she had little evidence to base this upon, other than that he'd spent some time at an ashram and sometimes invoked "the Universe" as it were a singular entity. She longed to tell him. She had never told anyone.

"I don't have any real secrets," she said.

"Sure you do." He settled into the couch, waiting. They locked eyes, smiling, suddenly engaged in a staring contest, waiting to see who would break away first. He looked almost beautiful. Had he taken better care of himself, he would be. She found it hard to turn away from him. This was how he'd gotten by with everything, that beauty.

He stretched out his arm on the back of the chair. "I've always found you—" he paused. "Enigmatic. I can't put my finger on what it is. Some secret, I think."

Azalea shook her head. Her heart pounded hard and fast. He was drawing nearer and nearer to something and she wasn't sure she liked it or not. She moved over to the end of the couch, draped her legs over the arm, and leaned back on both her hands. She looked at him and said in a languid tone. "Secrets." Then she brushed her hair back from her face. "Well, there was that one time. When I killed a man in Rhode Island."

Clive cracked a smile.

Azalea raised an eyebrow. "You don't believe me?" She got on her knees and leaned forward and whispered, "You don't believe I could do it?"

"You often surprise me," he said.

His reply made her smile. "Now it's your turn. What's your secret?"

"I'm fucked up," he murmured.

"Oh." She sat back on her heels and laughed. "That's not much of a secret, Clive."

He looked very calm and restrained on the couch, although there was a movement under his surface which hadn't been there before. The restraint gave her the feeling of watching a good performance, when there was more to give but the actor just crept up to the edge and lingered there. Her lower back ached. She straightened up. She had not once stopped to consider his interior, to wonder what it was that made him. It seemed that she might have been him, and that he might have been her, and the only thing that stopped them from being the other person was an accident. She wished that she hadn't been so cruel just now.

He looked at her directly and with unmistakable desire.

A melting sensation started at her navel and ran between her legs. She couldn't believe her reaction, how impossible it was to control. Her eyes dropped down at the floor.

"It's late." She stood up. Her right foot had fallen asleep and she leaned against the couch for a moment, rolling the pins and needles out of her ankle. She could conquer her desire if she didn't look at him. "I'll get you a pillow."

In her bedroom she grabbed the second pillow from the bed. The other set of clean sheets was in the hamper. She plucked off a stray blond hair from the pillow and returned the living room. He had already stretched out on the couch. She threw the pillow towards him and it landed awkwardly on his face.

There was mouthwash in the medicine cabinet and towels underneath the sink, if he wanted to wash his face. He said he was fine. He'd be out of her hair soon. She said goodnight and went back into her room and shut the door, locking it. Then she unlocked it. He was not some rapist, after all. As she settled into bed, she watched the living room light through the crack underneath the door. After a minute she heard him click off the lamp. The streetlights outside were still broken. The darkness of her room felt cavernous, and although her eyes were open she could not make out the familiar shapes of her desk and chair, or her dresser. At first the sheets felt cold but soon they felt too warm. She kicked off the covers. There was a kind of drumming inside her. She touched the wetness between her legs then stopped. He was on the other side of the door, he was so close. The clock read five thirty. She gave herself exactly one minute to consider the possibility of going to him. She had never slept with a person who was not, at their core, a decent human being. If she went to him with no expectations she had nothing to lose, and more importantly, nothing to gain.

She sat up in bed, placing her feet on the cold wooden floor. Then she remembered Emily. Emily had claimed him first. What would that look like, what if people found out, what would they say about her, about the both of them?

Azalea stood up and went to the door, a floor board creaking beneath her weight. She placed her hand on the doorknob but hesitated to turn it. If she went to him, if she climbed him and kissed his neck and pulled him inside her, she would still not feel satisfied. Her desire was its own fulfillment, at least it ought to be. He could never answer her. Fucking a man like him—when was it not demeaning? In ten years, she would wonder why she had done it. No one was worth it. No touch, no gaze worth it. Why did she want him? She hadn't wanted him at all before, that had felt like the truth.

She dropped her hand and allowed the center of her forehead to rest on the closed door. It smelled faintly of paint, strongly of old wood. There were parts of herself that remained hidden to her own mind. She felt so completely alone she did not feel ashamed, only curious to better know these other desires that lived inside her. She wanted to know this other self that was also her, the one who opened the door and took him to her bed. It seemed the only way she could meet this other self was if she went to him, right now. There was nothing to stop her. She would soon be gone forever, she would return only rarely. There was nothing to stop her. Only the worry that she wouldn't be able to silence the milling crowd of others who also lived within her, the ones who disapproved, the ones who gathered and gossiped.

A dark blue early morning light crept into the room. She turned around, pressing her back against the door and she slid her hand into the wetness between her legs, making circular motions around her clit. She wanted the experience of his body against hers, in hers. She imagined how he looked on the couch just now. She sensed that he was touching himself and

she imagined what she must look like as he thought of her. Crouched on the floor, she slid her fingers from her other hand inside herself. He could not see her, he could not keep the promise of his gaze. He could never answer her. When she came she disappeared for half a second and afterwards, could not remember if she had made a sound or not. He was gone by the time a white light haloed the curtains. No trace of him, not even a note.

## Chapter 4

Most of the ice melted in time for Thanksgiving, and then the world felt gray and damp like a sopping mop left out to dry. Azalea's throat tingled with pain. The virus she caught from Emily was colonizing her tonsils in spite of all the echinacea tablets and drinkable packets of Vitamin C. She took a Sudafed, packed a weekend bag, and arrived at her childhood home at noon to help with dinner. She had almost forgotten that her Uncle Gil would be there until she saw the change in the house.

His presence could be felt by the sudden neatness of the entryway. By the looks of it, Azalea's mother had spent days making the house appear as if tidy people lived there. Linda always went into a cleaning frenzy when someone she didn't like was coming over. The mud boots were lined up neatly by the door, the dog leashes tucked away into a basket, the newspapers her father left by the armchair folded now on a side table, the sofa vacuumed of cat hair, the potbelly Franklin stove dusted and coal black. Azalea did not recognize the cooking smells wafting in from the kitchen, the scent was ambiguously foreign. She peered through the oven window. A saffron yellow turkey sweated beads of fat. A recently purchased rice maker blew steam in the air. Roasted vegetables underneath tinfoil sat on the stove grates. She could hear voices from the front of the house. A strange man's gravel voice, her father's booming laugh.

#

The front living room was reserved for guests and decorated more formally than the rest of the house, with a velvet blue sofa she and Eli were never allowed to sit on as children if they

had just come in from playing outside. The whole family sat down on the antique furniture, drinking Coke and Sprite from the nice glasses. Her mother believed in dressing up for holidays. Linda wore her favorite silver necklace and a blue silk blouse, looking well-made up and camera ready as she did on her realtor cards. She crossed her legs and a black leather mule hung off her toe. Azalea smiled. The top of her head ached with tension. She had imagined that she would burst out crying when she saw him, in the manner of a day-time talk show reunion, but she didn't feel much of anything. Her uncle sat across from her in a chair with green upholstery, which looked more elegant behind his well-cut gray jacket.

“Zalie takes after you,” Linda said. “You have the same coloring.”

Gil sat with one leg crossed over the knee revealing black leather boots that zipped at the ankle. They were the only hint of the teenager who screamed into a microphone while wearing a sequined dress and combat boots. He was clean shaved with a face was more worn in than worn out. He looked like he had spent the last twenty years of his mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps, rather than drinking gin and tonics for breakfast and snorting a line of coke before the day started. Except for the yellowish tinge to his teeth and the faint smell of cigarettes, he didn't look like an addict. His blonde hair was several shades lighter than Azalea's. Some of it was turning white, like a marker run out of ink. He also had her jaw. It looked better on a man than it did on her. The reunion with her uncle, so far, was the uncomfortable experience of glimpsing into a mirror, if the mirror was male and mid-forties.

“Thank you. These are vintage, you could say.” He stretched his legs out and grinned. “You take after you mother. She's the one who brought the good looks to this gene pool.”

Azalea blushed.

“We’re just happy she doesn’t take too much after me,” Virgil said. “Not sure if my shoulders would be flattering on her.” Everyone laughed.

“We all know what you look like, now that you’re not hiding under the beard,” Azalea teased. For the first time since nineteen seventy-five, Virgil was clean shaven. He had kept a beard ever since he’d been discharged from the Army. Underneath his beard was pale, delicate skin that hadn’t seen the sunlight since his son had been born. His lips were thinner than she thought they would be, and he had the pure, earnest looks of a minister.

Gil gave Azalea a smile. He shifted in his chair and stretched out his right leg, pointing up the heel. This motion brought back a strong feeling of him. He had always moved in slow, deliberate that showed off his lankiness. He sipped on a bottle of ginger ale.

“Now Virgil,” he spoke to Azalea, “He always took after our mother’s side of the family. They were bigger boned.”

“You calling me fat?” Virgil laughed.

Gil chuckled and reached over to pat his brother on the arm. “No, I’m not. I’m calling Daddy skinny. He had that high metabolism.”

Virgil nodded. “Daddy would eat three eggs in the morning and snack on pork rinds all day. He never gained an ounce.”

“His temper burnt the rat right off,” said Gil.

Their voices broke into laughter. At the end of the laughter they let out the same wheezing sigh.

They fell into an easy conversation as if they did this every year. Linda went to the kitchen and got out a tray of cut-up vegetables and dip and set it on the coffee table. Everyone’s drink eventually ran out. Virgil mixed up Virgin Marys, and Azalea went to help him and noticed

that the bourbon on top of the refrigerator was gone. When she came back, Gil caught her eye and said he'd heard she was a very fine actor.

"I remember The Local Company when it first started," he said. "Is Joanne still around?"

"She's directing *The Christmas Carol*."

"Is she still a Dead Head?"

"I didn't know that." Azalea laughed and thought of Joanne's wardrobe of peasant skirts. "But she dresses like one."

"Arcadia is the perfect place for a theater, if you ask me. All those bored professors lamenting that they didn't get tenure-track jobs at Yale or wherever." Sometimes when he spoke the vowels smudged into a British accent. *Wherevah*. "But of course it's just like America not to invest in the arts. It makes the theater an elite thing. I lived in Ireland for a year and you wouldn't believe these little country theaters. All these farmers and shepherders putting on ties to go see *The Twelfth Night*. Great place to be an artist of any type."

"It's easy when you don't have to worry about health insurance." Azalea gave the ice in her drink a gentle shake.

"Exactly," Gil nodded. "All these young kids like you live off the dole for a few years to get their play written or their film made." He smiled out her. "You should travel."

Linda stood up to collect the glasses. "Azalea here got a 165 on her LSAT. She might be at Vanderbilt next year. Isn't that something?"

"I'm guessing a 165 is a good score?"

"Very," Virgil said. "Ninetieth percentile."

"Congratulations." Gil half lifted his glass of soda water. "How do you plan on acting while lawyering?"

“I don’t really,” Azalea shrugged. “I think I’ll end up with season tickets, wherever I am. I’ll be able to afford the good seats.”

“I could tell you’d be some kind of artist,” Gil said. You used to make those little clothespin dolls and shoe box houses and have me write down everything you said.”

Azalea felt herself smile. “I’d completely forgotten about that.”

“I remember everything. It’s a curse,” said Gil. “But you, *you* were the actor. Genevieve was the musician.”

A dark cloud seemed to pass over them all at the mention Genevieve. Whenever her name came up her parents always said the same things.

“That was a tragedy,” Virgil said. “God, it was awful.”

Linda leaned back in her seat. “The worse pain in the world, losing a child. Poor Hilary.”

“Thank God she still had Baby Mike.” Virgil crossed his arms and rested them over his belly. “Her new husband, I met him once. He’s a huge improvement. I haven’t seen Hilary in years but a friend of mine tells me they’ve got a really nice place in the mountains. I’m glad she’s doing alright.”

Gil cleared his throat. “I called her up the other day. I’m supposed to go up and see her in a couple of weeks. She told me you’re welcome anytime.”

“That’s definitely not what she said the last time we talked.” Virgil chuckled and rubbed his beardless chin. “Hell, I might go. Maybe it’s been long enough. I haven’t seen her since Mike’s funeral.”

Gil raised his glass to his mouth, the ice clicking. “I wish I had known about Genevieve’s funeral. I would have liked to have come. I would’ve at least sent flowers.”

“Virgil left a message with your secretary,” Linda said. Azalea shifted in her chair. Her mother was the one to always pick bones. She waited for her father to cool it down again, but he was silent.

“Really? I didn’t know that.” Gil blinked. “I guess that would have been a year or so after Stefan died.” He nodded and looked at the floor.

“Who’s Stefan?” Her mother frowned.

“The Consonants’ lead singer, you remember,” Azalea said.

“Oh right,” said her mother. “You and Genevieve made that shrine to him in your bedroom.”

Azalea’s couldn’t help herself. She rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t a shrine. We made a poster.” She looked at her uncle. “We tried calling you to offer our condolences, but never reached you. We did leave a message though.”

“Really? I don’t recall. Things got pretty dark that year. Stefan’s family — .” He trailed off. “The media never really thinks about the family. And just on my end I had photographers camped in front of my apartment for weeks.” He crossed his leg on the other side. No one said a word.

It felt like the right moment to inject the conversation with youthful optimism. “We’re all just so glad to have you here from Thanksgiving,” Azalea said. “We really are. That’s all Mom and Dad have been talking about. I mean, I hardly even recognize the house. Mom cleaned it up so well.”

“Your father helped, too,” Linda said.

The sleigh bells on the back door jingled and Eli boomed a loud hello. They all hollered that they were in the living room. Eli came in through the kitchen, declaring that it smelled like

an Indian buffet. His face was blasted red from the cold and the bottom of his glasses fogged from the heat. Azalea was never so happy to see him. His cheerfulness was a bright light.

He hugged Gil first giving him a loud pat on the back. “Great to see you, Uncle Gil! Gosh that was a long trip you took.”

“Whoa, there son.” Gil held Eli’s shoulders and took a look at him. “You grew! Am I allowed to say that when you’re now what, twenty-eight?”

“’Bout to turn the big three o.” Eli puffed himself to his full height and rubbed Gil’s head. “Sorry you lost the mohawk. That was the coolest.”

Gil put his hands in his pockets, his light gray eyes absorbing his nephew. “You kids aren’t kids anymore.” He shook his head. “I can barely wrap my head around it. Damn.” His face tightened and his eyes began to water. The whole room seemed to fold around him as tears rolled down his face. “You all have grown up but meanwhile I’ve only grown older. On the inside I feel about twenty-one. It’s like I stopped around then.”

“It’s alright honey.” Linda gave him two firms pats on the back.

“Please don’t cry, Uncle Gil,” Azalea said, a bit irritably. She suspected the rest of his visit would be like this, with him laying his emotions on them without giving a thought to how they might be feeling. “We’re all *very* glad to see you.”

Virgil went into the kitchen and brought back a paper towel. “There’s no Kleenex. You cry all you need to. Given the circumstances — we’re just glad you’re up and kicking. And remember it’s fine to call your sponsor.”

“I’m alright.” Gil blew his nose. “I just can’t believe — the time.” His voice broke and his shoulders shook with a voiceless sob. A streak of razor burn on his throat turned a dark pink. She lowered her eyes. Raw emotion usually intrigued her, making her feel as if she was

witnessing a surgery, glimpsing inside the body to see the truth of its gnarled bloody work. But it was embarrassing to see her uncle fall apart, as if he were wandering around the house naked and without shame. It was an imposition. Her eyes darted around the threadbare oriental carpet beneath his feet. Her father continued to console her uncle, soothing him with platitudes about how it's never too late and one day at a time. She refused to be present for this moment, not after what he'd put them through. She crossed her arms and sat back down on the couch, and knocked back her Virgin Mary, forgetting it had no vodka in it.

He dabbed his eyes with the paper towel then took off his jacket, draping it over chair as Virgil murmured affirmations about the positivity of expressing your emotions. Gil nodded, listening mostly and protesting some, and while all this was happening he undid the cuff links on the sleeves to his black button-down shirt. He rolled up the sleeves carefully to his elbow, revealing a tattoo on the inside of his left forearm, written in a florid calligraphy that must have been trendy in 1989. *Flectere si neuquero superos Acherota movebo.*

#

Azalea had forgotten about that tattoo. During the summer her father had helped Uncle Mike with the bedroom at the Hammond County House, Virgil gave Azalea and Genevieve twenty dollars to buy books from the K-mart across the highway, trusting them to look both ways (which they did, and were still nearly hit by a semi). They returned with pixie sticks the size of giant straws and blue nail polish that flaked off the next day. Gen chose a Nancy Drew mystery with a contemporary Nancy driving a red convertible. Azalea chose a V.C. Andrews novel with the troubled face of a girl in a looking out of an attic window.

Back at the house, Azalea tried reading her book on the floor, lying on her stomach with her head beneath Gen's desk. It was hard to concentrate. The sound of drills and hammers

jackknifed the low hum of the window AC unit. Azalea recalled that the desk had been recently stored in the barn under a tarp and until very recently. The hairs on her neck stood up. She flipped over, inspecting the corners underneath the desk for spiders' eggs. The varnished wood smelled newly cleaned with lemon oil. No spider eggs, but mysterious words were carved into the desk's underside.

She hollered for Gen to come over.

They squeezed together beneath the desk. Gen slowly read the words aloud, "Flectere si neuquero superos Acherota movebo." Azalea half expected the desk to turn spiral into a staircase leading to another world. It did not. She traced the words with her finger pad. A knife tip had made them, she had seen the kind of squared letters written on picnic tables in state parks. The cousins wanted to know what language it was. They ran outside where a handsaw wailed, yelling for Azalea's father to provide his interpretation.

Virgil said he barely spoke the King's English as it was, but he took off his safety goggles and ear muffs and followed the girls indoors. His t-shirt was drenched in sweat. Over the course of two weekends, he had visibly lost weight. He lay down on the floor beneath the desk and his head disappeared from view. "Latin!" He determined. Then he paused. "Your Uncle Gil must have written that. He's got a tattoo on his arm. I forget what it means." He was quiet a moment. "Girls, don't ever get a tattoo."

"Why not?" Azalea had never paid much attention to her uncle's tattoos when he lived with them. They had seemed to her a part of him, not a decision that had been needled into his skin.

"I know a lot of people who've been to prison. Every single one of them has a tattoo."

"Not all people with tattoos go to prison," Genevieve said.

“If you get one I’ll make them take it off without anesthesia.” He was still underneath the desk, then reached out his arm, pointing in Gen’s direction. “That goes for you too.”

“But what does the Latin mean?” Azalea demanded.

“I can’t remember. Something from a myth. Something about a river.” He knocked on the desk. “That’s good solid cherry right there.” He let out a groan. “I could take a nap here the rest of the day. Lend me a hand, would you honey.”

Azalea grabbed her father’s hand and helped steer him out from under the desk. His eyes were red and watery. The girls wrote down the phrase on a piece of scrap paper.

“This one,” Genevieve pointed. “That’s capitalized, so it must be a place or a person. Who or what is *Acherota*?” She blinked at her uncle.

Virgil wiped his face on his shirt. “We’ll look it up when we get home.”

They spent all of dinner translating the phrase from Gil’s old college Latin dictionary, which he’d left along with his tapes in the garage. The phrase didn’t make sense until much later, when Gen was dead and Azalea was in high school. She had typed the words into an internet search engine late one night. *If I cannot deflect the will of Heaven, then I shall move Hell.*

#

Without meaning to Azalea remembered the tenderness she had once felt for her uncle, her homesickness for him when he left. The feeling had been so huge in such a small person, she had thought she would burst from it. Azalea felt ashamed for having ever idolized him. He was just a man, not even a very good one. She felt such fury that she could barely stand to look in his direction, but eventually she had to. He had recovered himself, mostly. Red blotches ran beneath his eyes and down his neck. He stuffed the used paper towels into his pockets. “It just hits me once and while,” he said to no one in particular, “how short life is.” He laughed, shaking as head

as if it had all been a trifle, and he was almost charming again. Linda brought him a glass of water, which he downed, making gulping noises. He apologized for the emotional outburst, a side-effect of getting clean and sober. Probably the reason why anyone got high in the first place. He hated to be fussed over, he said. He dabbed his eyes again with the paper towels, and then a timer went off in the kitchen. It was time to eat soon, to set the table. Azalea poured water into the crystal goblets from her mother's great-grandparents, Czech immigrants who worked hard enough to buy themselves nice things. Dinner was almost ready, but Virgil had disappeared.

#

Before a holiday dinner or any important ceremonial event, her father would run off on an errand or embark on a project that would take twice as long as he expected. Holiday dinners were always served cold and the family sat in the back pews for every wedding, christening, funeral. Azalea and Eli zipped up their coats and stepped onto the porch in the sobering cold. Virgil's truck was parked in the driveway which meant he was still on the property. Eli pulled the door shut behind them and let out a deep breath. A light powder of snow had fallen. They walked down the porch stairs that were scattered with freshly laid salt crystals. They determined that Virgil must have gone to the shed to return the bag of salt. The light was dim and the sky a cold gray, a dirty mirror of the bright white hills. The house was on twenty acres, with a girth of trees around a perimeter, a creek down the hill filled with crawdads and cattails, an old black tobacco barn where a pair of cranky miniature burros lived. Virgil had won them by accident when he entered his name in a VFW lottery.

The frozen grass crunched beneath their feet. Azalea let out a sigh when they were out of earshot. "I didn't know what to expect but that's not what I expected."

Eli reached inside his jacket pocket and took a swig off the flask than handed it to Azalea. “He’s always been a mess.”

“That’s not how I remember him.” Azalea took a swig from the flask and a fire burned her tonsils. “For fuck’s sake. When did you start drinking hooch?” She puckered her cheeks. Whatever it was clung to her gums like cough syrup. She reached down and grabbed a handful of snow, stuffing it into her mouth. Her brother cackled.

“It’s moonshine infused with strawberries.” Eli took a delicate sip. “A friend of mine makes in D.C. Anyhow. Gil was always a head case. You were so little you wouldn’t remember.”

Her mouth numbed with cold but the taste was gone. “I was seven when he left. I remember plenty.”

“One time he took my Casio keyboard and smashed it against the wall when he got into a fight with Dad,” said Eli. “Another time he stole your Teddy Ruxpin and disemboweled it in a punk show.”

Azalea hadn’t thought about the disappearance of the talking teddy bear in years. It held a cassette player in its back under a fur flap. “I thought someone stole it from the yard.”

“And that someone was Gil,” Eli said, giving her a side look. He would hold his five years above Azalea for the rest of her life.

“No one told me anything.”

“You worshiped the ground he walked on. I mean, don’t get me wrong, he could be fun. But he could also be a mean old bastard.”

“I do remember him teasing you a lot for being fat.”

“Nowadays they’d call that bullying.” Eli had the same physique as their father. Unless he lifted weights he gained weight like a bear storing food for winter.

“Gil was always good to me.” Azalea struggled to think of evidence. “He let me eat cookies before dinner. And we played a lot of board games.” She would sit at the kitchen table before dinner waiting for Gil to come from the shed outside and sit down next to her and mess up her hair. He’d chide her for using a coloring book and say her own drawings were better. He taught her how to draw humans that weren’t stick figures. They made clothespin people wrapped in colored yarn, and he gave them weird names like Cornelius and make them talk in funny voices. He’d fill water balloons with Jell-O, leave them in the fridge, and they’d throw them at Eli on the driveway. He’d spin her around by her hands until she was horizontal to the ground. They’d sit in the grass the tie clover chains together and he’d teach her songs by The Cure. Above all, he treated her as if she had important things to say.

“That’s all very well and good but he left us in a heartbeat and never looked back,” said Eli.

“I guess he was never a very good person,” Azalea conceded. Secretly Azalea had loved Gil more than her mother and father.

“From what I’ve heard, getting clean screws you up even more for a while,” Eli said. “Whatever you’re pushing down all comes right out. You can’t block it anymore.” A loud crash came from the shed. “That’s either Dad or a raccoon.”

The dark green shed dark had with two rectangular windows on the front and back that hung with faded blue curtains. After Gil had left it had been repurposed for various uses. First by Virgil for his hobby in woodworking, then by Eli as a hangout where his friends played D&D on beanbags. By the time it was Azalea’s turn to use it squirrels had chewed through the electrical

wiring. It was too expensive to fix what with Eli going to college out-of-state, so the shed became a storage space for gardening equipment and fishing tackle. Azalea and Eli walked slowly in its direction.

“That turkey of his don’t even smell like a turkey,” Eli said. He was nitpicking now.

“You mean it smells *good*. He told me that’s how they cook quail in Iran.”

“Mom says he’s thinking of staying in Kentucky and opening a bourbon distillery with an old friend from high school.”

Azalea stopped. “An alcoholic opening a distillery? You’re shitting me.”

“I know,” Eli chuckled. “It’s like putting a diabetic in charge of a candy store. He says he’s just doing the marketing and hiring a chef for a restaurant to go with it. I dunno.”

Azalea shook her head, unbelieving. Her brother exaggerated sometimes.

They found Virgil on the other side of the shed pulling things out that he had intended to fix but never got around to. Gil’s old Honda motorcycle, a broken leaf blower, an antique plow that was drawn by a team of mules. His coat was draped on the steering wheel of the lawn mower and he wore yellow leather work gloves. It smelled like WD40 and hay.

Azalea sat on the lawn mower. “Your old lady will be pissed you if you get oil on that tie.”

“Dad, we’re starving! Only thing I’ve had today is airline peanuts,” Eli said, pretending to be exasperated. He leaned against a work table and looked around. “What are you up to out here?”

Virgil wiped his brow on his sleeve. “I’m taking out some of this junk and making a place for Gil.” He slapped side of the wall. “It’s got good insulation. Owen could fix the electric, give us a good rate.”

Azalea picked up a piece of hay and pulled the seeds off it. “Are you sure he’d even want to stay with y’all?”

“He’s got some royalties coming in,” sniffed Virgil. “But that rehab center, it’s the kind the Kennedys go to. He’s in a mountain of debt.” Virgil pulled a tarp over the hay bales. “And he put all his money in a record label that went bankrupt last year. Hand me my coat, honey. So I figure he needs a place where he can stay sober. No better place than a dry county.”

“That only means you gotta drive thirty minutes to get drunk,” Eli said.

The three of them walked across the wide bare yard. More snow was falling in big flakes. Winter had come early this year. The berries in the holly bush were so brightly red they looked as though they were painted on top of an old black and white photograph. Azalea wondered aloud. “Is mom okay with Gil staying in the shed?”

“She’ll get okay with it.”

“What makes you think he’ll stay clean?” Eli asked.

“I’ve seen plenty of men stay clean,” Virgil said. “The most successful are the ones who feel like they owe it to their loved ones. They start putting their faith in God.”

Azalea snorted. No matter how useful God was for other people, he, or whatever it was, gave Azalea a cloying, sentimental feeling. But since she knew her father was spiritual she attributed her irritation the other thing he mentioned. “Gil’s been gone almost twenty years. I’m not sure if we really count as ‘loved ones’ anymore.”

Virgil shook his head. “Time and distance doesn’t have a thing to do with love.” They walked up the hill and her father puffed. “I don’t know how he has lived as long as he has. Most of them don’t make it this far.” He stopped and turned to face Azalea and Eli, and they were children again. “I hope you kids can forgive him.”

“Of course we can,” Eli nodded.

Virgil looked at his daughter.

“I was so little when he left.” Azalea shrugged. “I don’t see what there is to forgive. I hardly even remember.”

#

It was unusual for Azalea’s mother to allow anyone full control of the Thanksgiving menu. Usually Linda would retrieve her grandmother’s wooden box of recipes from the top of the pie cooler. The recipes were written by hand on index cards, and they all called for ingredients like canned asparagus and gelatin molds and canned mango. The food was hearty, overly fattened and overly reliant on cream, flavored more with nostalgia than actual seasoning. The meal that Gil had cooked looked and smelled nothing like Azalea’s grandmother’s.

Gil had learned to cook from an ex-girlfriend who was a chef. On the table the saffron yellow turkey sat on a silver platter and girded by a bed of parsley and chives. It had been cooked, to Linda’s shock, in plastic bag. Down the center of the table was a row of silver and china dishes containing a poached pear walnut salad, whipped sweet potatoes, roasted beets with goat cheese, green beans and cherry tomatoes tossed in garlic and olive oil, a dill and herb yogurt along with cranberry chutney. There was something made from fish called a *ceviche*. The only outlier was the pumpkin pie from Kroger, sitting alone in a plastic container on the buffet with the price sticker on it. Gil did not have time for dessert. The food looked delicious yet somehow it perplexed them all. Her father called it gourmet, intentionally mispronouncing it *gore-met* like a yokel. Her mother overflowed with compliments in a way that indicated a hidden displeasure. Eli asked where the stuffing was. Azalea held on to the back of her chair, feeling a pull of envy that nearly lifted her off her toes and then shooting her into a familiar realization. She had been

living off of inferior substances for too long, her tastes were underdeveloped. Looking at the table, she saw traces of whole universe of people who cooked turkey in plastic bags and ate raw fish brined in lime juice, who had spare white condos with expensive modern chairs that were somehow both ugly and beautiful. Her uncle was one of these people. They held hands and as the blessing was said, he squeezed hers on and off like they had when she was a kid because it had made her squeal. She opened her eyes and looked at Gil, whose eyes were still sealed, his face revealing nothing of the expired joke that was going on. He was trying very hard, she thought.

The plates were passed around in a procession. Before eating they raised their goblets of sparkling apple cider in the air and Virgil made a toast. To Gil, to family, to gratitude, to health. And then they each cut into the turkey and took a bite.

Eli was the first to speak. “Oh my god,” he moaned. “This doesn’t taste at all like turkey. It’s manna from heaven.”

“It is certainly the best turkey I’ve ever had.” Linda dabbed her mouth. “Gil, you’ll have to share your recipe.”

They recalled the turkeys from Thanksgivings past. The year the oven broke and they ate delivery pizza. The year of the fried turducken at Aunt Lucy’s in Houston. The year they had gone camping in an RV out west and ate turkey legs cooked over the fire. The year before Azalea was born, when her father nearly got in a fist fight with Uncle Mike for calling Gil a faggot, and the turkey had fallen on the floor in the scuffle.

And then the two brothers broke off in a separate conversation, remembering aloud their childhood Thanksgivings turkeys donated by the Bethsaida Baptist Church on Walnut Street back in Hammond County. At dinner they would break the bones in half and suck out the marrow. Their mother used every last scrap, canning the broth, frying the organ meat.

“She made that turkey last till the charity women brought in the Christmas ham,” Virgil said, and everyone laughed.

“I wish I remembered more of her,” Gil said “She was a sweet woman.”

“How old were you when she died?” Azalea asked.

“About eight.” Gil chewed slowly. “None of us expected it. She’d been getting better. It’d just been a tooth-ache and then it went septic.”

Virgil wiped his mouth. “She was a sweet as she could be. I wish you kids could’ve met her. Her voice was like a songbird’s. I don’t know if she’d have married daddy had he not been so good looking.”

“He was handsome, alright.”

“Made him think he could get by with anything.”

“He *did* get by with anything.”

The brothers chuckled.

“I don’t know if you know this about your father here,” Gil said, “but for a while he was known as the rebellious one. At night he’d sneak out and go smoke pot and drink by the river with his friends.”

“Why, I never,” Eli gasped, feigning shock.

“All those years of you telling me that pot would rot my brain.” Azalea shook her head. “That I’d be grounded for the rest of my life if you caught me with it.”

“It’s fine for some people, in moderation,” Virgil said.

Gil laughed. “I remember I used to let him inside through the bedroom window. Daddy never found out. This man right here — I don’t know what he ran on when were in high school. He never slept. But he made good grades. Never late to football practice.”

“Daddy would’ve tanned my hide if he had caught me,” Virgil said with amusement. “He was a mean drunk.”

“And he was always drunk,” Gil said. The brothers both laughed tight laughs from their chests.

Virgil wiped his eyes. “He had a hard life growing up in that orphanage. Spare the rod and spoil the child was what they went by. That’s where he got his parenting skills.”

“I didn’t know granddaddy grew up in an orphanage,” Eli said. Unlike Azalea, Eli had vague memories of their grandfather, who died before Azalea was born.

Virgil frowned. “You knew he grew up in an orphanage.”

“No, we didn’t,” Azalea insisted. “You never mentioned it. Only that he was an orphan.”

“Well, honey, where do you think orphans grew up back then?”

“You said he was raised by his great-aunt or something.”

“He moved in with her when he was fifteen, and only for a couple of years. Before that it was the orphanage, someplace in southern Illinois. He’d changed his last name to Stuart around then.”

“On account of your great-grandmother being a bootlegger,” said Gil, holding his fork midair. “She’d been using the name of the man who we think may have been daddy’s father. Bellome.”

“Wait.” Azalea sat down her glass of apple cider, flush with excitement. “Our grandmother was a bootlegger? That’s amazing. Dad! Why you been holding out on us? This way more interesting than mom’s side with all the shoe salesmen.”

“Excuse me,” her mother said, “but they had the largest shoe store in South Central Texas.”

Azalea and Eli howled with laughter. She was so glad her brother was there. Everything her parents did that would have been annoying became hysterical. Azalea exchanged glances with Eli and he made her laugh even harder, till her throat ached. She took a long swallow of water. The Sudafed was wearing off, her sinuses flaming.

She served herself more ceviche, which her mother, forever worried about salmonella poisoning, was afraid to touch. “Eli must take after Dad’s side. He’s been sipping on moonshine all afternoon.” As soon as she said it she remembered that Gil was there and in recovery. She put her hand to her mouth.

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “I’ve got no craving for moonshine.”

“In that case.” Eli removed the flask from his jacket. He passed it to their mother. “I wasn’t sure what the drinking policy was at the family gathering so I came prepared.”

“Give me that.” Linda waved and gave Eli a stern look. She sniffed the flask then took a sip. Her face puckered. “Good Lord. Why does it taste like strawberry preserves gone bad?”

“It’s small-batch moonshine infused with strawberries,” Eli said. “It’s going to be bigger than small-batch whisky.”

Azalea rolled her eyes. “God, Eli, you’re such a hipster.”

Eli pointed his fork at her. “You’re the one who wore that ironic John Deere hat in college.”

“I *sincerely* liked that hat.”

“I’m far too old to be a hipster. This is your generation’s problem, not mine.”

“That was Dad’s John Deere hat,” Azalea insisted. “It was authentic. Dad’s the original hipster. He had that woodcarving hobby, likes to can vegetables. Listens to Neil Young.”

Virgil nodded his head. “Always ahead of the curve.”

“Now what exactly is a hipster?” Linda asked.

“Like a hippie, Mom, but rich,” Azalea said.

“I don’t see how that’s much of an insult.” Linda turned to Eli. “Good for you for being a hipster, my dear.”

“Thank you, mother.” Eli glanced at Virgil. “Anyhow, Dad doesn’t look like a hipster with the beard gone. Now he looks more like a youth pastor.” Everyone laughed.

“Well, your father does own more than one short sleeve button-down,” Linda teased.

Virgil played along. “Y’all heard about the good news of Lord a’comin’?”

A warm swell of love for her family gathered in Azalea’s center. Being with them was like hitting a reset button. As soon as she relaxed, Clive interrupted her thoughts. It mattered less and less. Last week she had only been pretending to be a person who was attracted to someone like Clive. It was fine to experiment, but she was getting too old for it. The person she was right now with her family was the truest version of herself.

“So tell us, Father,” Eli spoke in a mocking voice, his cheeks rosy. “How come you’ve never let us in on this scandalous family secret? Afraid we’d be ruined forever? Hmmm? Fall from our high station?”

Virgil scrapped the remaining food on his plate. “We didn’t know it ourselves until Daddy was close to dying. He kept it to himself for so long. Never wanted me to mention it to you.”

“Daddy’s mother was also a prostitute.” Gil chewed on a dinner roll and spoke out of the side of his mouth. “That’s how she wound up in the bootlegging business. To get out of the whoring business.”

The lime juice in the ceviche Azalea's gums shrink. "Oh," she said, thinking of Lorna Mae. "That sounds like a hard life." She washed out the lime with a bite of the sweet potatoes. "Did you know about any of this, Mom?"

Linda looked down. "I guess we didn't say anything because —" she shook her head. "I don't know. You all were so young. Now you're old enough to know. Of course, nobody would ever choose a life like hers, given the choice."

"We *suspect* that she was a prostitute," Virgil clarified. "Daddy said she was a maid at a famous madam's house when she was a little girl."

Azalea put down her utensils and placed her hands in her lap. "I guess child labor beats child prostitution."

Virgil wiped his mouth and chin fastidiously as if he still had a beard. "It's a very sad story. I suppose I didn't say anything because we have enough sad stories in the family as it is. Daddy only told us about it a week before he died. He nearly took it to his grave. I don't know why he kept it so close, it could have really — "

"Your great-grandmother was dragged out of her house in the middle of the night and murdered in cold blood." Gil didn't look up from his plate. "She was probably killed by the bootlegging competition."

Linda's knife and fork clattered against her plate. "I really don't think this is the best topic to get into right now." She smiled broadly. "Eli, do you and your friends have a business plan? For the distillery? How exciting!"

Azalea's throat burned. She sipped her water. Then she picked up her utensils again and slowly began to cut her food. Her father's face looked sunken, and he sat back in his chair with his arms folded across his chest and resting on his belly. Things had turned serious. "Daddy

asked me to let him die with the memory of it, so that it wouldn't keep on living. But anyway, this is a subject we may want to save for another time. We have so much to be grateful for, to be thankful for."

Gil continued on as if he hadn't heard. He addressed Azalea and Eli. "Our father was just four-years-old when she was murdered. He didn't have much memory of his childhood before then. He hid in a closet during the whole thing. Otherwise they probably would have taken him and drowned him too."

Azalea leaned back in her chair, suddenly full. "What do you mean 'drowned' him?"

"They put his mother in a sack and threw her in the river. Her remains, they came up ashore after a flood."

"And our great-grandfather?" Azalea's voice grew higher. She tried not to sound upset. "Where was he in all this?" She wasn't sure why her chest was tightening. This all happened so long ago, to people she had nothing in common with other than blood.

"She was never legally married to anyone." Gil scratched the back of his neck.

"We're not sure exactly who he was or what happened to him," Virgil said. "Daddy said he was from St. Louis. I would really prefer that — "

"Now, your great-grandfather, supposedly he was an Italian involved in the big gangster bootlegging rings. But that could all have been horseshit as far as I know. But she did use the last name 'Belome' to buy her house, and that's a common last name in Sicily. We figure that's where your dad gets that swarthy complexion of his." Gil took another roll and buttered it.

Virgil looked very pale and not at all swarthy, at the moment.

"You always told us we were Melungeon and Shawnee," Eli said.

Azalea turned in her chair to speak directly to her uncle. “So our great-grandmother was a bootlegging hooker who was brutally murdered. And our grandfather saw it.”

“That’s right,” Gil nodded. “Sure beats being a daughter of the American Revolution, don’t you think?” When he grinned she could see the young, defiant teenager in his face. He could not conceal his delight in making his brother shrink. Virgil looked gray and miserable.

“I can’t believe you never told us.” Eli shook his head and laughed. “I mean, wow.”

“It’s not what’s important.” Virgil cleared his throat. “All this stuff about who your kin are. They’re all dead and gone, but we’re here. We survived them.”

Gil wiped his mouth, his face solemn. “The older I get, the more I think the dead are never gone. That’s the problem with the dead.” He let out a thin laugh. “If they were truly dead we wouldn’t be talking about any of it now, would we?”

Azalea wondered how many times her uncle had recited the story of her great-grandmother at dinner parties in Europe. How they must have leaned forward to drink him in, some punk rock kid from an American hick town, descended from a clan of bootlegging drunks and whores. And yet he was enough like them to be as real as they were. They must have found him fascinating.

Azalea felt she might be sick. A film of sweat coated her forehead. She had eaten too much too fast. There were only a few bites of ceviche left in her maternal grandmother’s little shrimp cocktail glass. A fever rose like a fluid up her neck and into her head. She felt hot and cold at once. She pulled off the gray cardigan from the back of the chair and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Eli took off his glasses and wiped them with a napkin. “You know, Gil, if you still plan on opening that distilling business with your friend, this bootlegging ancestor of ours would be a hell of a marketing ankle.”

Gil straightened up and snapped his fingers. “I’ll be damned if you didn’t read my mind!” He turned to Linda, “This son of yours has a head for business. Must have gotten some of those shoe salesman genes.” Gil swiped his hand in the air. “We’re thinking of branding it as Belome Distillery, since 1922. Pass the roasted vegetables, would you Zalie? I figure Helen could be a sort of iconic founder. Always good to have historical credentials.”

Her mother gave Gil an icy look, and then gave her daughter an almost undetectable nod.

Azalea folded her napkin in half and placed it on the table. She spoke to her brother because it would have been rude to speak to her Uncle. “This isn’t a joke or a business plan. It’s horrible, what happened to her. And obviously it’s a crime rooted in misogyny.” She thought of what the men inevitably would have done before drowning her great-grandmother, but she couldn’t say it aloud. She shuddered.

Eli rolled his eyes and turned to his uncle. “I honestly think it’s a great angle. You could draw up a nice vintage graphic, stick her face on the bottle.”

“We’ll have the story of how she started her own business, as a brassy female entrepreneur.” Gil raised his glass of sparkling cider. “Make it part of the tour.”

“It’s genius.”

Eli and Gil raised glasses.

“This is fucked up.” Azalea’s voice was raw. When arguing with her brother, the only way to win was to not appear upset, but she could not find that cold, still place. Her hands had rolled into fists underneath the table. “Even if we weren’t related to her I’d say this was wrong.”

“You’re taking this way too personally,” Eli said. “It’s not like anyone is left alive who even knew her. She’s not like, a *real grandmother*.”

“I don’t see why you are so excited about taking your grandfather’s tragedy and slapping it on the side of a whisky bottle.” Virgil’s voice boomed. When her father boomed it was a mountain that trembled. Everyone grew quiet. “It ain’t a thing that can be sold. What happened to her destroyed Daddy, and he almost destroyed us. I can hardly stand to think about it.”

Eli’s face turned white and he stared down. “We’re were just spitballing. We weren’t serious.”

Gil raised his eyebrows. “I say she owes us for raising such a shitty son for a father.” He turned to Azalea and looked at her calmly. “Helen started her business out of some holler up in the mountains, but then moved around here and bought herself a big place in Hammond County. She thought she was rich enough to hide in plain sight. Your granddaddy used to drive us by her old house and say, ‘Son, we should have been living a gracious life in that place, but we lost it all in the ’29 stock crash.’” Gil chuckled. “Of course, he never mentioned that his mother was a hooker or a bootlegger. Said she died of breast cancer, and that his father was a rich business man from St. Louis who’d abandoned her.” Gil laughed. No one else laughed except for Eli, who let out an agreeable chuckle, his forehead glistening.

The whole conversation felt as if it had happened before, and she wondered how she could have forgotten it. Her heart beat fast and shallow. A friend in college once told her that *deja vu* was the mind remembering an event as it was happening. She told herself this, but it did not ease the feeling that deep down, she already knew the story.

“What did you say her first name was?” she asked.

Gil glanced at her. “Helen.”

Azalea nodded. It was nothing more than a coincidence, that name. Why would it be anything else? She stood up, feeling heavy and sick, and brought the pumpkin pie to the table. Tomorrow her voice would be shot. At least the play was over. Although she wasn't hungry she cut herself a slice of pie. As she did this she heard her father speak. "Daddy may not have been a good father but he put a roof over our heads. He may not have been a good man either, but he became a better one. I know you're angry at him but you can't say that he didn't find some good in himself, near the end. He had it hard growing up, Gilbert. Harder than you and me. And I think it'd help you tremendously if you forgave him. Forgiveness is — "

Azalea had heard it before. *Not something we do for others, but for ourselves.*

Gil interrupted her father before he could finish. "Virgil," he put his elbows on the table, "we had a monster for a father and nightmare for a childhood. But I don't see you making your own shitty upbringing an excuse to abuse your children. As far as I know, you've never beaten them till they couldn't sit down. You never made them sleep tied up to a tree in the dead of winter, or told them to eat your table scraps on the floor."

Her father let out a long sigh and rubbed his face. "He loved us the only way he could."

"He did not love us." Gil set down his fork and knife with a clatter. He pushed back his chair away from the table and turned in his seat to face Azalea. "Did Virgil ever tell you that our father made me kill my dog when I got caught sneaking out at night?" He snorted and looked to his brother. "When I snuck out, there wasn't nobody to let me through the window. She started barking when I came in. He told me to take her outside and shoot her. And that's what I did."

Azalea stared at the centerpiece her mother had picked up from the Kroger. Orange mums and branches with tiny red berries on them. Then she turned her head to glimpse her uncle. Tears collected in the corner of his eyes but they didn't fall. He had never cried in front of

her when she was a kid. Never. He shook his head. “I mean, I don’t know who does that to their own child, except a monster.” He glanced back and forth at Azalea and Eli, his face looking apologetic “We’re descended from monsters. I’m sorry to tell you.” He let out a deep breath and put his arms over the back of the chair. “But that’s just the way it is. Ain’t it Virgil?”

“Just because you’re descended from monsters doesn’t mean you are one,” Linda said quietly. “That not how it works.”

“I’m sorry, brother,” said Virgil. He was now speaking in what Azalea thought of as his therapy voice. She heard it on the telephone late at night, when people called in with emergencies. His baritone lulled and held the listener, like swinging in the middle of a hammock. “I’m sorry for everything that happened.”

Gil sniffed. “You being sorry didn’t keep him from molesting our sister.”

Everyone one fell silent.

Azalea looked around at her family. The silence stepped forward. For a split-second she had no idea who they were. It was like walking past a mirror and seeing a stranger in it before recognizing yourself. She recognized all at once who they were and what they had been hiding. All those times Hilary wouldn’t get out of bed, or brush her hair, or go to class to finish her nursing degree. Azalea’s eyes drifted down at her plate. She had taken one bite of the pumpkin pie. She could not make herself look up.

Gil took a drink of water and continued. “You being sorry didn’t stop you from signing up for the Army.”

Linda spoke between her teeth. “Gilbert, you let this go.”

Her parents and uncle continued a strained conversation while Azalea tended to her own thoughts. Genevieve had always insisted on playing make-believe in the barn. Even before the

drugs she tried to lose herself in a world that was more beautiful than this one. She'd always been a runaway. She had another name and another face, to escape her life.

“Did you say our great-grandmother’s name was Helen?” Azalea’s voice had gone hoarse. No one seemed to hear her.

Virgil spoke with his usual self-possession. “I did not sign up for the military. I was drafted. I’m very, very sorry I was drafted. I wish I could have been there to protect you.” Her father’s face was sorrowful. He held back so many heavy things and never complained. He remained grateful for what he had. The secret source of all happiness, he said, was gratitude. Azalea didn’t want to complain either. She only wanted to know. She forced her eyes up.

“Did you say our great-grandmother’s first name was Helen?” The name stuck in the back of her throat, a bone she nearly choked on.

Eli’s eyes darted at her, annoyed. “Helen Belome.”

Her father and uncle continued to argue. Gil’s voice growled lowly, while her father never once broke his deep lulling tone. Her mother gripped the end of the table, bunching the white tablecloth. Azalea tried to breathe but the air didn’t do anything but harden in her ribs. When Gen ran away, right before she died, Gen stopped by Azalea’s house after school. Azalea gave her a pumpkin pie and eighty dollars. How she spent that money, Azalea never allowed herself to consider. Azalea could feel her consciousness slipping backwards, as if pulled over the edge of a cliff. Her eyes searched for an object to anchor her. There was the antique puppet from Turkey that her maternal grandmother had given her mother as a gift one year. It stood on top of the piano beneath a hard-plastic case. She loved to fear that puppet as a child. It was hideous, with white chipped paint, a big nose, dressed in a dusty gray gown, bald with black rimmed eyes and a leering red mouth. The palms of his hands were fused to poles that used to move his arms

but appeared now as two canes. She used to crawl on the floor when passing the puppet so that it wouldn't detect her. When her father saw how badly it scared her he took it to the attic. She never mentioned how much delight it gave her to fear something so harmless, and when she was older she and her mother cleaned out the attic and they put the puppet back in his place atop of the piano. It thrilled her, in a similar way, to see the face that haunted Genevieve's, to stare directly at the mystery. Although it was useless it was powerful. When Azalea tripped acid in college, she washed her hands in the bathroom sink and looked in the mirror only to find a hundred different faces staring back at her, all made from the same material of her own reflection. Azalea must have stood there for an hour, expecting Helen to appear. She never did. Which seemed to suggest that Helen had been more than a mere hallucination of the brain.

Helen belonged to Genevieve. Helen was real.

Azalea's ears rang with a high note. "Dad," she began. Her voice fell down a well.

Darkness blurred the corners of her vision then draped it.

Her mother shouted her name.

Azalea heard the sound of her body thud to the floor but felt no sensation.

Then she was in a hallway with dark wood floors, and there was Genevieve.

"Let me get you Helen's address." Gen spoke as if they were in a middle of a conversation. She was grown but still wearing the white dress she'd been buried in. It was too small for her. When she turned around she walked with a sway in her hips, her high heels clacked loudly the wooden floor. They arrived at Gen's old bedroom. She pulled out her old address book, the one with unicorns and rainbows on the cover.

"She lives real close to us." Gen tore out a page and handed it to Azalea. "You can find her upstairs."



### **Part III**

#### **Chapter 6, 1994-1995**

After discovering the Latin phrase underneath the desk, Azalea went home and asked her mother to translate. They spent dinner pouring over a Latin dictionary that Azalea had found with Gil's other things in the shed. By the time her father cleared the plates, they had partially decoded a full sentence. *Bend a little Heaven cannot move Acheron*. It made no sense, the meaning swallowed up by uncongugated verbs and that final place noun. Linda's brow was furrowed. All of her high school Latin had dissolved, she couldn't tell third person from first anymore. And as for Virgil, his thick country accent was so shameful that his Spanish teacher in college begged him just to please keep his mouth shut. Before Azalea went to bed she read through her book of Greek myths for clues about this person or place called "Acheron." The Romans had adopted the Greek myths their own but in a sort of lazy way, keeping the stories but changing the names.

The Ancient Greeks believed that you could get in trouble for the tiniest of sins. In that way there didn't seem to be much difference between the Bible and the myths. Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt; Persephone tasted a pomegranate and spent half the year in hell for eternity. Once, a few years before, Azalea had once tried a pomegranate that her teacher had brought back from California. She sliced it in half so that the children could look into the honeycomb chambers, pulling out bloody seeds the size of baby teeth. Such a small mistake could steal you away from your mother forever.

*Bend a little Heaven cannot move Acheron.* Azalea went to bed wondering what it could mean and why Uncle Gil had drawn his phrase indelibly onto his arm. She used to miss him terribly, then forgot about him, and now she remembered that she missed him again. When a person left the love you had for them remained, and you felt sad because there was no place for that love to go anymore, and it stayed trapped inside your heart whirlpooling into a hole. Before he had been like her brother, only he never yelled at her when she touched his stuff. It wasn't very nice of him to leave like he did, but that wasn't really his fault. He had an addiction and addictions were part of a chemical imbalance, according to her father. When she closed her eyes she could see her uncle clearly. His hair, when it was pulled into a full mohawk, always alarmed other people. They would stare at him whenever they went to the grocery store. Unless of course they had seen Gil before and knew who he was. Then they would just say *Hey Gil, how's your brother doing*, and give Azalea a sucker. Even if she could translate the Latin phrase properly, she would still not understand what it meant to him, or why he wrote it under the desk and on his arm. It was like she was at the end of a very long game of Telephone. One day she'd go to Europe and ask him for the original message.

#

At least Uncle Mike had torn down the wall in the Hammond County house early in the summer. The air was still cool at night and the daytime temperature had not reached the nineties. Linda was furious that her brother-in-law had started construction without consulting them. She did not want Virgil to sacrifice his weekends to build the third bedroom. But Virgil insisted that the entire house would be ruined by mold if they didn't finish soon, and a master bedroom would only increase the property's value. This last part Linda understood very well, being in real estate school. Every Saturday for the rest of June she made Virgil and the children a heavy breakfast

and sent them off to work in Hammond County. “We’re getting screwed in this deal,” she would grimace, before handing Virgil a cooler of Sprite and Diet Coke.

In spite of Virgil’s help, the third bedroom at the Hammond County house wasn’t completed in a month. A storm tore off the plastic siding in the middle of the night and rain poured into the hallway soaking the carpet. Virgil and Azalea went to buy a new one on a Friday afternoon. Azalea climbed up a tall stack of area rugs and waited for her father to finish talking to the owner, an old friend from high school.

She yawned and slid down the carpets and went to look at the paint color samples, which were printed on long rectangles of paper the size of bookmarks. The colors had the most interesting names. Effervescence. Lady of The Lake. Tangerine Dream. Paloma. One day she would paint her house in Skylight. It’d be the house she’d have next door to Gen’s. Azalea took one sample of every shade of blue. Her father was finally at the cash register and he gave her a quarter for the gum ball machine. The saleswoman commented that the new carpet was the color of milk with vanilla in it. The owner, Terry, gave Virgil a twenty-percent off discount for being a veteran and a ten-percent discount for being a Hammond County High School alum.

Linda had arrived home a few minutes before them from real estate class. Her clip-on earrings sat in a ceramic bowl by the entryway. The TV in the kitchen was turned on to the five o’clock news. Azalea’s mother wore an apron over her office clothes and was making pre-marinated chicken breasts that came in plastic wrap. Virgil told her Terry had given them a great deal on the carpet, and he knew a guy from the VFW who would lay it down at a good price.

“Lucky for Mike and Hilary that you know somebody. I’m not sure how they can even afford a new carpet with all that construction. Do they even have credit?” She snorted. “Zalie, go set the table. The dishes are clean.”

Virgil filled the pepper mill and explained he would be paying for the new carpet. “We,” he corrected himself.

Linda sat down the spatula and turned to him. Her face was pale. “Are you serious? How is it they we ended up paying for a master bedroom and a new carpet when our very own roof needs to get replaced next year?” Color returned to her as she spoke. She picked up the spatula and flipped the chicken. “Take it out of their deposit.”

But there had been no deposit.

Hilary would pay it back, Virgil insisted, once she found a nursing job.

Linda waved the spatula in the air. “She’s not going to find a job. She’s been in school for seven years. Seven! Damn it to hell the chicken’s burnt on one side.” She turned off the gas.

“Alright I hear you.” Virgil rubbed his face.

“They can blame me.” Linda wiped her hands on a paper towel. “I’ll do it now. Get it over with.”

Azalea had sat in embarrassed silence throughout the conversation. Had Aunt Hilary walked in just now she would’ve felt the contempt for her whirl the air, a phantom Linda had summoned.

Linda plated the chicken then picked up the cordless phone that sat on the table near the small kitchen TV. She spoke in a cheerful voice. “Hilary! Hi, how are you We’re just about to sit down to eat supper but I wanted to call you real quick and let you know that I am just *so* sorry about this, but Virgil made a mistake on our budget this month. We just don’t have the money to help you replace the carpet right now...A loan? Well, honey right now I’m right in the middle of getting my real estate license so only one of us is working full-time. Things are tight...Honey, now, don’t cry. Don’t cry. It’s only a carpet. There’s a floor underneath. A perfectly fine wooden

floor. You've got something to walk on....Well, most people when they need to pay for something, they go out and get a job...Yes, I know that but I used to wait tables and paint houses when I was finishing my degree..."

Her mother stood silent and said uh-huh periodically for what felt like several minutes. Then her voice lowered an octave.

"I'd hate for Gen to have to drop out of her piano lessons, too. She's very talented. We'd only been saving fifteen dollars a week on that and we're happy to support her....Yes, but that's certainly not enough to pay for a new carpet, is it?...I understand that you wouldn't have the time to watch both of them, if you found a job."

Linda sucked in her cheeks.

"If that's how you feel about it then that's your decision. Alright. Uh-huh. If that's what you need to do, you do that...Bye-bye now."

The phone clicked into the receiver. Linda reached under the back of her hair and rubbed her neck, then looked at her daughter sheepishly. "Looks like we're going to have to put you in violin camp until school starts."

Azalea made loud noises of protest. The horror! Violin camp! The unfairness! She was old enough to stay by herself!

The plan had been to go to Hammond County three times a week for the rest of the summer, where Hilary would watch the girls. Azalea didn't tell her mother that when Hilary was in charge, she often left the house for long periods of time to run errands or drive to class in Midway.

Virgil cleared his throat. "You know, violin camp is going to cost as much as the carpet would."

Linda gave him a piercing look. “Nothing would cost as much as that carpet would. Can’t you see they’ve been sucking on us like a teat?”

“Mom, that’s a disgusting metaphor!” Azalea made a face. She was sent to her room while her parents continued their argument, the chicken growing cold on the table. When she was called back down, they ate dinner while watching *The Cosby Show*. Virgil informed Azalea that from that day onward she would be going to his office at the VA. It wasn’t her idea of a perfect summer but if she had to go to violin camp she would lose her mind. She ran back upstairs and called Gen’s number, making her voice high and girlish when Hilary answered, as a disguise, but Hilary knew exactly who she was. “Gen can’t come to the phone right now, Zalie.”

When people were mad on television they sometimes threw things at the wall. Azalea decided to try this to see how it felt. She grabbed a porcelain donkey a friend had brought her from Tijuana and hurled it at her closet door. It’s ear chipped, she felt no better. Azalea crumpled to the floor and cried silently.

#

Actually, the VA actually wasn’t that bad. She could wander around the grounds, climb the trees in the courtyard, read books on the concrete benches until her father got off work at six. In the afternoon when it was too hot she’d sit in the lobby watching daytime talk shows with the patients. She could make popcorn in the kitchen area, and roller-blade in the parking lot.

On the weekends Azalea began to discover traces her Uncle Gil buried around the house, as if he had lived in an ancient civilization that had been destroyed abruptly save for a few artifacts. A Honda motorcycle under a sooty tarp in the barn where her father kept his fishing tackle. A leather jacket in the closet underneath the stairs, with a flattened box of Marlboro lights squashed in its front pocket. Azalea tried to smoke one outside by the creek but it wouldn’t stay

lit. She searched the house for more evidence, determined to understand each thing's importance, but no matter how many things she found the meaning was lost.

The attic contained photo albums of Azalea and Eli when they were little, and Gil appeared in these. He was sometimes black-haired, sometimes bleached blond, and rarely smiling. She realized she hadn't seen a photograph of her uncle in years. There were none of him downstairs by the mantel where her mother's family posed in their Easter dresses and tailored jackets, or on the hallway walls where baby pictures of Azalea and Eli hung, or on the end tables in antique frames, where a few Czech ancestors she never met stared out of a sepia-toned world.

No one from her father's side appeared anywhere around the house. Her grandfather had been an orphan, Virgil explained, her grandmother grew up so poor that she wore flour sack dresses and left school after third grade.

She removed a photo of Gil from the photo album's plastic sleeve. He was dressed in full punk 1980s regalia — ripped jeans, black leather jacket with clothes pins, a Stooges t-shirt. He bowed his head toward her. Her hand was extended to touch one of the spikes on his mohawk. At first she kept the photo on her dresser but her realized it might make her parents worry. So she stored it between the pages of her encyclopedia of different horse breeds, and when she wondered what Gil was doing, or where his power came from, or if she herself had inherited any of it, she would take the photo out and look at it as if gazing into a crystal ball.

#

It wasn't true that he was completely gone from their lives. There were the postcards, for one thing. And for Christmas, he sent packages of oily tortas that crumbled as soon as you opened them, and dry marzipan with white-wigged Mozart-looking fellows on the tinfoil. To Eli, he gave mugs with elfish Santas defecating over the side — some sort of tradition from a region

in Spain called Catalonia, read the informational note. To Azalea he usually gave a little doll of some kind, wearing whatever was the traditional costume — a Dutch girl with wooden shoes and coiled blond braids, a Laplander in berry red and white with coiled toes, a Greek girl in blue carrying a jar upon her head. She collected the dolls on the shelf above her desk even when she had outgrown playing with dolls. He always remembered Azalea's birthday, and he would send both her and Eli t-shirts emblazoned with names of European capitals. By the time she was eleven her t-shirt drawer made it seem as if she'd been to every duty-free shop in Europe. They were always two sizes too large and worn as night shirts until she grew into them.

Nothing had arrived for her twelfth birthday that May. Finally, in August, a large padded yellow envelope waited at the post office for her. It was battered with black track marks. The lower-left corner was ripped, while the upper right-hand corner was full of ten stamps from the newly established Czech Republic. When she squeezed the package it gave way with the unmistakable softness of plush cotton and her heart sank. Prague was the capital. She remembered this from the new post-Soviet Atlas her father bought on sale at K-mart. She tore opened the package in the car.

To her surprise the t-shirt was of a band. The Consonants. Three airbrushed shadows strutted through golden rain. Tour dates were listed on the back. Folded in bubble wrap was a CD jewel case with three moody, beautiful blondes not making eye contact. Two girls and a boy with lips like Elvis. Azalea pulled the t-shirt over her clothes; it actually fit. There was a short note to the family written from the hotel. Prague was cheap and beautiful. His band had broken up but he'd found a calling as a manager for Swedish pop band he'd heard play in Amsterdam. The Consonants had a radio hit and he had booked their American tour for next year. He was doing very well, traveling a lot, living in Spain mostly these days when he wasn't on the road.

He owned a flat in Stockholm and another Barcelona. They were, as always, welcome to visit, although he thought they might enjoy Barcelona the most, which was only a short train ride from the ocean. He wondered if he might pay them a visit next time he was in the states, since business sometimes took him to New York.

Azalea pulled on the t-shirt over her tank top, happy, because Gil had said he'd like to visit him next time he was in New York. She immediately ran upstairs to play The Consonants CD in her room. Now they would be reunited again, and he would show her the path that was hidden from her. She placed the CD in her boom box, then sat on the edge of her bed, anticipating the first notes.

It was hard to tell what sort of music it was. However, she was certain that it was the ugliest music she'd ever heard. There were no guitars, no instruments that she recognized as instruments. It was upbeat at first, and the voices of the women twined in harmony. One voice smoked and warbled the low notes, the other caught and folded the high notes. A strange beat pulsed in the background, and a few seconds into the song, the beat layered, gaining new electronic sounds, more and more as it went along, like magnetic ball picking up metal as it rolled along. For a moment it sounded like the CD was stuck, but then she realized the glitch was intentional. It repeated and became part of the song. The electronic sounds reminded her of science documentaries, microscopic footage of cells dividing and multiplying. She turned off the music, confused. It was too strange. It locked her out of the song and she wasn't sure how to get inside. She resumed the rest of her evening as normal. Over dinner her mother announced that Eli would quit his job at the Subway so that he could look after Azalea for the rest of the summer. They would pay him to babysit.

Eli reached over and tussled Azalea's hair in a way that felt very forced. "It'll be like being here by yourself, I swear," he said. "I'm only around to make sure you don't burn the house down roasting marshmallows over the stove."

She darted her eyes. No one was supposed to know that she roasted marshmallows over the gas stove.

She was not a child anymore. She fled from the table as soon as she cleared her plate, determined to like *The Consonants*. If her uncle liked it then it had to be good. None of the records he'd left behind made any sense to her until she had listened to them three or four times. She shut the bedroom door harder than normal and turned on her boom box, starting at the beginning. The disc whirled. She sat on the bed with her back against the headboard. Sometimes she had the ability to collect her attention in a forceful way. She did that now, and her mind taut as a drawn bow, her attention the arrow. She would find a way to enter the song and she would not turn away from it.

The first notes played again, gathering strangeness as they went along. She recognized the albums Gil had left in the shed, cut and assembled within the music. The smooth highness of Donna Summer, the low bass notes of Joy Division. When she found the familiarity, the strangeness of the music began to startle her, a shape crouching toward her from the darkness but she would not move away from it. Her fists clenched, she closed her eyes. A metal fishing net, glitter on snow, a wet brown paper bag, a dark forest, a campfire.

She opened her eyes. Some curtain had fallen away. She looked at poster of a horse running on the wall near the window, the grass shimmered and oscillated with the music, the muscular legs shuddered but never extended into a full stride. Ovals of light from the brass chandelier detached themselves and floated on the air until they evaporated. The shape in the

darkness drifted past her, inches away from her face. The music kept breathing within her, her heart didn't beat so much as breathe the way fire has to breathe, and the heat of this fire filled her palms with sweat so she had to open them, and when she did the song unlaced her. She woke up from a dream and knew that she could not stay awake for very long. The final notes exhaled and she stood up, grabbed her hair and pulled at it, so the skin around her skull relaxed. This is how things moved when no one was looking. She wasn't supposed to see any of it, and yet she had.

The song ended and the pause fed into another song, this one as ordinary as anything they'd play at the roller-skating rink. As the end of summer heat baked the dirt and the grass yellowed, the second song found its way onto the Top Ten.

It played on the radio, in drugstores, in the dressing rooms of malls, at sweet-sixteens, and on the soundtrack of movies about young love. People skipped the first song and go straight to the second. They missed the real thing for the one that felt solid, that golden calf of a song. But Azalea didn't know any of that. She felt like she'd been admitted into a secret club. At once she knew that she and Genevieve needed to start a band. They'd call themselves The Nancy Darlings, to carry on the name of their uncle's old band, the one that rehearsed in the shed and played so loud that birds quit nesting in the gutters. Satisfied and dreamy, she turned off the boom box and went to brush her teeth.

## Chapter 7

It wasn't until the beginning of September that they went to Hammond County again. Azalea was never clear how her father convinced her mother to let them reconcile with Aunt Hilary, but one night he asked if Azalea would like to go with him to visit. In the morning Linda sipped coffee in a bathrobe while Azalea and Virgil prepared to leave. Virgil grabbed steaks from the freezer in the basement, and Azalea scooped leftover potato salad in a plastic container. Linda reminded to wash out and take the Tupperware back home. She would not be going with them, since she had an open house on Sunday afternoon, and Eli had a debate team meet. Matter of fact, Linda wasn't sure if she would ever be interested in seeing Hilary and Mike again, not after the incident with the carpet. Azalea prickled at this. "I thought family was supposed to come first," she teased. "And let bygones be bygones."

Linda pressed her lips together. "They're not my blood."

"You got to forgive people, Linda." Virgil poured ice into the cooler.

"Not my blood." She stood up and dropped her mug loudly in the sink.

Azalea had never deeply considered this before, that the blood that pumped from her heart and built her cells was like Hilary and Gen's. They shared the same large upper canines, could raise one eyebrow, had thumbs that looked like they'd been sawed off at the top. It made her shudder to think that she was anything like Aunt Hilary, who wore too much blue eyeshadow and clothes fitted tight. When Azalea went to the bathroom before they left, she was careful not to look in the mirror. For the rest of the morning each word between her parents rang like a violin string tuned too high.

When they pulled out of the driveway her father fluttered his lips. “Family will be there for you when no one else is,” he said. “That’s why we’re going.” And Azalea nodded. Her father understood things about people that others didn’t. If there was a kid who was mean at school, or an old person who was irritable, he could tell you what made them that way, and most of the time he was right. There was always another thing behind a person’s meanness, a pair of eyes looking out from the dark. Her father knew how to speak to it.

#

Gen ran out of the screen door, tiptoeing barefoot on the cracked walkway. Only a couple months had passed but she looked three years older. Her perm loosened into a wave, her eyebrows rose into thinly tweezed arches, her denim shorts hugged her hips. To Azalea’s disappointment, she saw that their Uncle Gil had also sent Gen a Consonants t-shirt. It was the same one as Azalea’s but on Gen it fit better. Azalea hadn’t realized that the shirt was supposed to be cropped. The hem stopped right at Gen’s belly button, so that when she raised her arms to wave you could see her flat stomach. When they stepped out of the truck Virgil said to Gen, “You’ve sprung up girl!” Aunt Hilary pinched Gen on the arm and smiled. “She’s looks like a teenager now, can you believe it.” Gen had grown out of all of her clothes and they had some hand-me downs for Azalea, some training bras, if she wanted them. “But I don’t know if they’ll fit you yet.” Aunt Hilary looked her up and down, and Azalea felt the smallness of her own body growing even smaller. She almost felt like she might shrink into the grass but just then Gen pulled her arm and yelled, “Let’s go!” They left the adults talking on the porch and headed into the barn. It was one of the last warm days. The leaves rolled into themselves ever so slightly, tightening their grip, and there was the earthy smell of decay in the air like the inside of a wet jug. Their uncle was practically famous. Could Azalea believe it? Their uncle, friends with Oona

and Kirstin and Stefan! Why hadn't Azalea worn her shirt today? Hadn't she gotten the message that they were going to pretend to be sisters?

Gen tugged at her new underwire bra and said Azalea was lucky to be flat-chested, she ought to pray she stayed that way. The wires dug into Gen's skin and left red marks at the end of the day, but Aunt Hilary said she had to wear or else grown men would start looking. When they got to the stall Gen reached under the back of her shirt and shimmed the bra off her shoulders and pulled it through her sleeve. She hung it on the nail. It was pink with black polka dots, from Dawhares. There was so much to say, so much that happened, Azalea felt as if she hadn't talked to a single person in years, because talking to Gen wasn't like talking to anyone else. They folded origami sheep and frogs with paper Azalea had bought at her school's book fair. Gen admired Azalea's mood ring and hemp necklace and said Azalea looked more alternative than she did before, and did this mean that she smoked pot? Azalea lied and said that she tried it with her brother's friends, but it didn't work. Gen nodded and said it often didn't work the first time because you didn't know how to really inhale. Her ex-boyfriend Adam smoked pot, and could probably score them a dime bag, but she didn't talk to him anymore.

They ran up the house to find the blue nail polish so they could give themselves manicures, and stopped for a minute because the corn on the cob was ready. The adults sat around the grill in plastic yard chairs by the crab apple tree, drinking beers except for Virgil, who called himself an alcoholic who never drank. A rosy blush had begun to erase the green from the crab apples. The cousins looked for ripe ones that didn't have any worm holes or brown spots. Crab apples were always sour but there was something to be said about eating fruit right off a tree. Uncle Mike told them that at the construction site a man fell two stories, landing on a stick that stuck into his shoulder like a spear. Had he a fallen a few inches to the right the stick would

have pierced his heart. The company didn't want to pay any workman's comp. Uncle Mike was getting too old for this shit. He might get licensed in AC and heating. Hilary snapped green beans into a colander and threw the ends in a plastic grocery bag. When she saw the girls empty-handed, she passed them half of the green beans, and the girls sat on the porch steps snapping beans and singing their favorite Consonants songs. Gen liked the weird songs and the popular songs too, and was working out all the melodies on the piano. She was up to track five. One day they'd start their own band, The Nancy Darlings, and practice after school. They'd need a drummer before they really got going. Their uncle could introduce them to the right people in the music business. Their album cover would be them dressed up as Nancy Drews and holding flashlights and walking through the woods. Azalea would have to learn the guitar because you couldn't play the violin in a band. Lucky for her she had a good singing voice, said Gen, but Azalea thought her voice was crap — last week a girl on cross country told her she sounded like a dyke. Gen's head jerked up. "Want me to pay her a visit?" Gen took the bean and decapitated it with her long thumb nail. Azalea said that she already handled it. She told that bitch that maybe she sounded like a dyke but at least she didn't have ham hocks for an ass. They clapped hands and laughed so loud the adults asked them what on earth was going on over there. "Two peas in a pod." Virgil bit his thumb nail. "Since they were babies."

The temperature dropped and moisture hovered over the grass. The mosquitos started biting. Aunt Hilary turned on the bug zapper, lit a few citronella candles, and sprayed their legs but the girls kept getting bit. The adults were all talking Bill Clinton. A man's private life sex life was nobody's business. The girls went inside to the cold living room, and found Baby Mike playing Nintendo. Azalea had almost forgotten Baby Mike existed. He said hi without taking his eyes off Super Mario. His hair was cut short like he was a seven-year-old cadet. He sat on the

carpet which had caused all the fuss. It still smelled like a brand-new subdivision house, and it really did look like milk stirred with vanilla. Azalea and Gen took off their sandals in the doorway and sank their toes into the plush threads. They weren't allowed to wear shoes on the carpet anymore, it had cost a small fortune.

#

Inside Gen's bedroom Gen told Azalea the real reason why Adam stopped talking to her. Gen had decided that it was time to lose her virginity since she'd gotten her period. Adam lived on the other side of the highway behind the K-mart and he drove a moped. He was cute enough to gain experience on. They'd tried having sex in Adam's basement but he couldn't fit it in all the way. He told her to come back when her pussy was bigger. She could hardly walk and put an ice tray between her legs when she got home. She decided she didn't want to have anything to do with him, but left her backpack at this house, so she went over there last weekend. Adam pressed her against the wall and put his hands down her underwear, saying that they should try again. She told him to quit. She was still feeling like she got kicked between the legs. "And then," Genevieve held up her hands to her throat.

Azalea hadn't seen the other face in a long time. It looked somehow clearer than it had before, less of a shimmer and more of a solid. It was hard to say if the woman was beautiful or ugly. The whole thing was too strange to consider her beauty or ugliness. Helen's blinked at Azalea, and Azalea held her breath. Maybe she was beautiful but in the normal way. She had a unibrow that formed into a V above her nose, cheeks as round as sliced apple halves, and eyes that looked like they were struggling to tell her something. At the same time, there was something about Helen which was not entirely like a person at all, but like an animal that will meet you at the edge of the forest.

Azalea never noticed it before, but it was only Gen's face that had changed. Everything else belonged to Gen. The light brown wavy hair, the small ears, the triangle at the base of the neck was Gen's. Azalea she reached out her hand and lightly touched the center of Helen's forehead, the way you might touch a caterpillar, with the expectation that it would curl up. The skin was warm. A ghost made from flesh. It was possible, wasn't it, if a God could be put into flesh?

"Gen?" Azalea asked, a bit scared. "Are you still in there?"

The woman watched Azalea, it seemed, with some caution. "She's still here." She spoke with Gen's voice, wearing it, like she was wearing the rest of her.

Azalea's hands shook. The woman was breaking the rules, talking to her. It was much more frightening now than it had been when they were little, before they knew that the rules even were. Azalea shouted for her to go away. As soon as she asked Gen's face returned.

"Don't scream, don't cry!" Gen's eyes grew wide and nervous. She covered Azalea's mouth. "She comes to me when I need her. She's my guardian angel."

Azalea wiped her face on her shirt and swallowed. "Angels aren't supposed to let you see them."

"Mary saw angels."

"Mary was Jesus's mother."

"The shepherds saw angels too. They weren't anybody's mother. They just went back to herding sheep or whatever."

Azalea felt queasy. "Those are just stories to explain ideas." This is what her mother told her whenever she had questions about the Bible. "Maybe she isn't really an angel." Azalea's heart was racing. "Maybe your face just does that."

Gen frowned. “You saw her with your own eyes.” She stood up and moved to the keyboard and started playing Mozart, but with the sound effect of a choir.

Azalea watched her from the back. If her brother was here, he’d say that seeing wasn’t believing, that there needed to be a study with a control group. But she was pretty sure that she didn’t need a scientist to tell her what she’d seen. As Gen played piano she could feel herself settling down. “Does it hurt?”

“No.” Gen shook her head and stopped playing. Gen sat down back on the floor next to Azalea, and drew a star in the carpet with her finger. “She puts me away, so I’m hiding and don’t feel much of anything. I can see and hear everything that’s happening, but it’s like watching on TV.”

It made little sense that something so utterly strange could be so incredibly boring. But Azalea nodded as if she understood.

“Sometimes I ask her to come out, and she does for a while.” Gen drew her legs into her chest. Her look was far away. They were sitting so close, Azalea could see curved profile of her eye, the lens filmy and wet. “It’s like I forget who I am and then she remembers me.” Her face was very still. Then she blinked slowly. “I just get really sad sometimes.” She cleared her throat and turned to Azalea. “Do you ever feel like life is a bad dream? Like we live and die and nobody counts? Like maybe God doesn’t really care that much about us? Or maybe even,” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “he doesn’t even exist?”

Azalea didn’t know what Gen was talking about, not yet, but she said “Yes,” because she knew that Gen needed to hear yes from someone. Although this information about not mattering confused her, she scooted over to Gen and wrapped her arm through hers.

Gen bit her lip and let it go. “Maybe she’s not an angel. Maybe she’s a dead person who got lost on her way to heaven, and she decided that she liked me.”

“Maybe.” Azalea suddenly remembered Adam. “What’d Adam do when your face changed?”

Gen rubbed her eyes smiled. “He about pissed his pants.”

Hilary knocked the door and they both jumped with a squeal. Whatever spell that had been cast over them broke. It was time to eat dinner. They stood up with their arms threaded together, stumbling to their feet, and they walked in step through the living room and kitchen and to the yard. They might walk like this forever and ever, one hip touching, smelling of cucumber body spray. They squeezed into the same plastic chair. Steak juice ran through doubled paper plates, butter melted from the corn. Hilary was about to go inside and drag Baby Mike away from his video game, but then they heard him shouting and running toward the door. He burst out panting. “I was watching TV,” he gulped. “You gotta come see for yourself ‘cause you won’t believe it.” Stefan from The Consonants was found dead in his hotel room.

## Chapter 8

The two girls stood in front of the television watching MTV News. Flowers in plastic wrap and heart balloons had already collected in front of the gate of Marriott Hotel in London. Candles, half-liquefied in votive glasses, burned in front of Stefan's photograph, the one where his lip curled like Elvis. Paramedics wheeled out a stretcher, his body inside the black bag. Gen hadn't stopped crying. "I can't believe he's gone." She bit her clenched fist. Azalea's mother said that when James Dean died, two girls near her hometown jumped off the railroad bridge, killing themselves. Azalea wondered if anyone loved Stefan so much that it made them stupid. She realized that she didn't really love Stefan at all. Oona and Alice could find another co-writer, couldn't they? Maybe she was heartless? It was the right moment to cry, someone beautiful and young and talented had died, but she couldn't summon any feeling. Her heart was like a foot that had fallen asleep. What was wrong with her? Even her father looked vaguely upset.

A boring-looking man with a British accent came on TV to make a statement. Stefan had been found dead in his hotel room early in the morning of the previous day. The suspected cause of death was a heroin overdose. Friends and family asked for privacy during this time. They also requested that any —

"Is that Uncle Gil?" Gen pointed. Behind and to the left of the boring-looking man was their uncle, wearing sunglasses although the day was starved of sunlight. He needed a shave, and he kept his chin down like he was saying grace before a meal and moved only once to scratch the side of his nose. It was the first time any of them had seen Gil since he left. Azalea wanted to kick the TV when it cut to other news. People at a rock concert covered themselves in mud and slammed their bodies into each other with gleeful violence.

“He’s alright.” Virgil let out a long sigh.

“You know uncle Gil was in New York last month,” Gen blurted.

Virgil raised his eyebrows.

Gen ran to her room and came out with one of the overpriced celebrity gossip magazines they sell at the grocery store check-outs. On page eleven was a photo of Stefan walking with a group of people — two leggy women in slip dresses and high heels. Trailing behind them was Uncle Gil, smoking a cigarette, looking sweaty and handsome, his head cocked toward a brunette woman, her head thrown back and her mouth open in a laugh, as if he’d just said the funniest thing she’d ever heard. The caption didn’t mention Gil at all. *Stefan Larson and “Straight Aces” actress Amy St. John leaving the Wild Hearts nightclub in Greenwich. New item?* There was something beautiful and undone about them. The women’s hair was wet as if they’d been outside in the rain, they all had dark-circles around their eyes and their short skirts revealed stringy thighs and knees.

Virgil sat down on the couch with a groan. He told them to listen. “We’ve talked about drugs before. The thing about drugs is that they just don’t hurt you. They hurt everyone and everything in your life. That’s why your uncle has never come visit.” Virgil seemed to have lost his breath. “He’s a drug addict.”

Azalea knew this already, and had read all about addiction in the brochures at the VA office. The cure involved talking to other people with the disease, and twelve steps like going up a staircase, and accepting the things you couldn’t change. “When is he going to get better?” she asked her father.

“Sometimes people never get better. They stay addicted until it kills.”

Azalea trembled. “You mean uncle Gil is going to die?”

“If he doesn’t get clean, then yes.”

Azalea was sure she felt it now, the finality of death twisting in her gut, oddly relieving. She felt tears and held them back. It all made sense, why they never called him, why he said he was going to come visit but never did. Gil might as well be dead. Virgil rubbed his face. Gen just stood there biting her lower lip not saying anything.

“Now y’all just hold on a minute. Let’s pray for him to get better. There, there, honey.” His long arms reached around the girls and he brought them in close. He looked at them both squarely, with one of his eyebrows raised into an arch. “If I catch either of you with drugs I’ll beat the tar out of you. You’ll never leave the house again. Do you hear me?”

“We hear you.” Azalea nodded and rubbed her eyes.

Gen must have sensed an opportunity. “Uncle Virgil, can Zalie please spend the night?”

Virgil rubbed his face with his hands. “Why not.”

The girls bounced up and down, their grief forgotten. They hardly ever spent the night at each other’s houses. They couldn’t even remember the last time they’d had a sleepover. They would have a vigil. They would make their own memorial, on poster board. They would play The Consonants’ album every Friday for a month—no, a year. They would wear black to school on Monday. They would save up and buy Stefan’s favorite cologne from K-Mart, the one that was under the glass case and cost forty-dollars. But first they would eat Hilary’s banana pudding and say good-bye to Virgil. Did they have an extra toothbrush? It didn’t matter, Azalea could use Gen’s.

They ran to Gen’s room, put on the album *Love and Popcorn*, and got to work. Gen had been collecting magazines with anything Consonants related for the last two months. They scoured the pages of *Tiger Beat* and *YM* for his photograph. They cut out things that seemed

appropriate to mark a death: flowers, hearts, a full moon, hands interlaced, a leopard with a diamond leash. The words “angel” and “heart-sick,” the words “paradise” and “talent” and “gorgeous.” They drew glue letters at the top of a poster and doused glitter over them, funneling the excess onto a sheet of paper. “Music is my air,” he had once said in a *Spin* magazine interview. They traced a full-page portrait of his face with pencil, and Gen shaded it so that it looked like it was hand-drawn. When they were finished they hung the poster above the stereo and sat down at the foot of the bed. Like anyone who has busied themselves preparing a memorial, the end of activity dropped them into a flat, oppressive silence. None of it felt enough to release him. There was something more to be done. It occurred to Azalea that they were mourning the wrong person. Her uncle was the one they had lost, not Stefan. She had heard that when you can’t find a soldier’s body you place a flag in the coffin and bury that. That’s what they were doing, burying an empty coffin. Gen pointed out that this might be true but that unlike Stefan, you could still talk to Gil. There was no need for a Ouija board, they could pick up a phone and call him. Gen went to her dresser and pulled out her address book, the one Azalea had given her last year. In it was Gil’s number. Azalea had written it down because it felt cool and important to have a foreign number in an address book, a line of digits that stretched past a billion.

Years ago Gil had sent a postcard with the number of his flat in Barcelona on it, left as a P.S. Azalea had written it down in an address book she’d given to Gen for her birthday. Neither of them had the courage to call until now. They looked up how to call collect in the yellow pages so that Aunt Hilary and Uncle Mike wouldn’t get charged. Before they dialed they wrote a script on a notepad so they wouldn’t clam up. Gen would call since it was her phone, and she could sound like an adult. They pressed zero and dialed the rest of the number. No one answered. They

called again, sharing the receiver. The phone kept ringing and they waited for it to go to the answering machine. Then there was a pause to accept charges. Gen yelled and handed Azalea the phone. “It’s Azalea Stuart? Your niece?” She announced herself. A woman’s drowsy voice answered *Bueno*.

They hadn’t expected someone to answer in Spanish. Azalea’s palms began to sweat and she almost dropped the phone.

“Hello?”

“What? Who is this?” The woman switched to English.

“I’m Azalea Stuart? Gil’s niece? From the United States of America?” Everything Azalea said came out as a question.

“Hold on.” Muffled sounds filled the background, the click of receiver on a hard surface. Azalea mouthed *oh my god oh my god* and shook her hand in the air. Gen screamed silently.

“Sorry,” the woman said. The *r* sounded like a an *r* from a spy movie. “Gil is not here and won’t be back until next week.”

“Oh, ok. Thank you.” Azalea started to hang up.

“This is his nephew?”

“His niece. Azalea. In Kentucky?”

“Eh...hello, Azalea. Did you receive the birthday gift on the day of your birthday? I try to send it on time this year.”

“Oh yes! Thank you!” The Consonants tour t-shirt had actually arrived three months late but she wasn’t about to complain. “I love it!”

“That is great. I will write it down that you called. One second...I am looking for a pen.” Shuffles, a drawer opened and shut. “How is the climate in Kentucky?”

Azalea looked outside the window. The sunset was a thin red ribbon behind the trees.

“It’s nice. Warmish? How is it there?”

“Very hot, even for September.”

Gen poked Azalea’s arm and motioned to the script. Azalea read it aloud. “I’m very sorry that Stefan passed away and that I won’t be able to see him in concert. My thoughts and prayers are with you. May the Lord give you strength and comfort.”

The woman let out a sigh. “Thank you. Yes, we are all very sad about it.”

Azalea had reached the end of the script and didn’t know what else to say. The paper quivered in her hand like a little bird trying to escape. “I hope that I will meet you — I mean, I mean — I hope I will see my uncle again someday. In the future.”

“You want to meet your uncle some day in the future?”

“Yes ma’am,” Azalea said. “I haven’t seen him since I was seven and a half.”

There was a silence.

“How many years do you have?”

“I’m twelve.”

More silence. Then the sound of the phone switching ears. “But he was there for the New Year, visiting his brother.”

“Um, no he wasn’t? We haven’t seen him or talked to him in like, years.”

The woman laughed. “I’m not sure if I understand. My English, sorry, is rusted. Sorry. You say he was not in Kentucky? For the New Year?”

“That’s right. He wasn’t here.”

“You did not go shooting guns off in the garden? In the United States?”

“Shooting guns on New Year’s? No.” Azalea frowned. “My parents won’t let me touch guns.”

Gen waved frantically for her to stop.

“And was not there the last year for the day of the Thanksgiving?”

“Nope.”

“What about the Easter egg hunting, three years ago? You would have been, let’s see, nine?”

“Excuse me ma’am, I haven’t seen my uncle in five years or even talked to him since he left.”

There was a long pause. *Stop* Gen mouthed, but Azalea was determined to get to the bottom of the misunderstanding. “Can you please tell him that I called and that we miss him?”

“Ok. I understand now.” The woman’s voice turned cold. “Thank you for calling.” The receiver clicked.

“Oh shit.” Gen clapped her hand on the side of her face. “I think you just told on Uncle Gil!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he was lying about where he was over New Years! I mean he was probably cheating on that woman and using us as an excuse!” Gen lowered her chin like she was talking to a child. “Girl, don’t you watch *Melrose Place? 90210?*”

Azalea pulled her shirt over her knees and drew her arms and head inside. She was going to stay here for the rest of her life. “Oh my god,” she groaned. “He’s going to hate me.” She peeked out of the shirt. “What should we do?”

Gen was rolling on the floor with laughter.

“It’s not funny! He’ll never come home now!”

Gen stopped and wiped her eyes. “You’re going to stretch your shirt out. And he’s not ever coming home. My mom says he would’ve come home by now, but Uncle Virgil won’t let him.” She lowered her voice. “Don’t you know he stole money from your dad before he left? That’s how he bought the plane ticket to leave.”

Azalea had never heard this before.

“It was a lot of money, like a thousand dollars or something.”

Azalea’s heart sank. All summer she had been trying to assemble him, but she could never make him into a whole person. There was always some information missing.

“Your parents like to shelter you from things,” Gen said.

Azalea stuck her arms through her shirt. Her parents didn’t trust her to know the truth, they wanted her to be a child forever. Gen’s bare legs kicked up to the ceiling, they were evenly tan and hairless, and dotted with red mosquito bites. Gen spread her curls out on the floor so they made a dark crown above her head. She looked very satisfied with herself as she explained the details of how men cheat, how a woman might discover a stray hair on his jacket, or smell perfume on his collar that isn’t hers. Even though Uncle Gil was an addict and a thief Azalea didn’t stop admiring him, although she ought to. He had left her clues and signs on how to get to the world that lay just beyond what she knew. She wasn’t sure if she wanted her cousin’s vision of maturity, which mostly seemed to be about getting your cherry popped and finding the right shade of foundation. There had to be something else waiting for them, more than perms and Nair and underwire bras that left red marks. Gen asked if she wanted to watch a movie. They went out to the living room and Gen read the titles of the VHS tapes. They’d seen all of them a hundred times. “I feel like something scary,” Azalea told her cousin. “Something with monsters.”

#

The ended up watching a movie about a talking racehorse, a tape from the video store that Virgil had checked out years ago and lent out to Hilary. He ended up paying twenty-five dollars to the video store because Hilary said she'd lost it. "My mom was looking for this one," Azalea said. "We can watch it at my house next time we have a sleepover."

Gen snorted. "We never have sleepovers at your house 'cause your mom hates my mom."

"She doesn't hate your mom." Azalea began to search her mind for evidence of this, but then the horse on TV began to talk.

They fell asleep with the crocheted quilt over them, their legs crossing over each other, their toes inches away from their noses. A blinding light woke her up. Uncle Mike had come back from his buddy's house, smelling of beer and cigars.

"Girls," he said. "Y'all need to pick up this mess before you go to bed."

Azalea shielded her eyes with her hand adjusted to the lamp light. She blinked. Popcorn kernels lay scattered over the new carpet.

"I didn't lay down this carpet for you all to ruin it."

Azalea moved as if still in a dream. She crouched on the floor picking up kernels, dropping them into the metal bowl. It was her fault they were everywhere. She had stepped on the bowl by accident on her way to the bathroom earlier.

Gen was still rolled up in the blanket, her face hidden under a pillow. Uncle Mike shook her by the shoulder. She groaned. "Come on, get up."

Gen jerked her foot under the blanket.

"I've got it," Azalea said. The kernels clinked into the metal bowl. They were everywhere. Under the TV stand, beneath the coffee table, behind the sofa where she found the

Red Power Ranger and a dirty nickel. She felt more awake now, her mouth dry and salty. She had forgotten to brush her teeth.

“Azalea, stop cleaning.” Uncle Mike swayed. “Genevieve needs to learn some responsibility. You’re gonna let Zalie clean up the whole mess?”

“I knocked it over,” Azalea said. “I’ll clean it up.” She reached for a kernel beneath the couch and sat up. She didn’t see what happened next but she heard Gen shriek. A knee — or a foot or a hand — swung into Azalea’s left eye. On reflex she dropped the popcorn bowl. There was a hard thud against the wooden coffee table. When Azalea looked up the coffee table was turned over and Gen was on the carpet. Uncle Mike drew up Gen to her feet by neck of her shirt and hit her on the face. Gen shrieked, “Fine! I’ll pick it up! Fine!” Uncle Mike let her go.

“Dad, you made me hit Zalie! Let me see your eye.”

Azalea’s left eye was already half-swollen shut, her vision blurred with tears. She pried her eye open and looked at her cousin’s face. A drop of blood crawled out of Gen’s nostril. Gen seemed unaware that she was bleeding. “That’s going to be a shiner,” she winced. Then she turned to Uncle Mike. “Aunt Linda is going to never let her spend the night now!” Gen yelled. “I hate you!”

“Shut up and calm down.” Uncle Mike disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a bag of frozen green beans wrapped in a dish towel. “That’s what you two get for roughhousing.” He handed the bag of green beans to Gen, who held it to Azalea’s eye. “Keep that on for fifteen minutes and you’ll be fine.” He pointed his finger at Gen and staggered. “Look what happens when you don’t listen, when you don’t mind.” He expected everything to be cleaned up in the morning. The girls hunched over the carpet picking out kernels from the deep plush threads.

“Good night girls, love you.” Uncle Mike called from the hallway.

When he shut the bedroom door Azalea started to cry. They had done so much worse before than spill popcorn kernels on the floor. It didn't make sense for him to get so mad. The ice was numbing her eye socket. She took it off and saw Gen's nose was dripping red dots on the carpet.

"You're bleeding all over the carpet," Azalea told her.

Gen's curls were matted from the pillow. She looked small and wild and battered. She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a wad of paper towels pressed to her nose, the white blooming with a red stain. Time slowed down and it felt almost peaceful. Gen sat on the floor and tilted her head up. "He gets like that sometimes." When she brought her face down she was completely Helen. She didn't seem to notice she had changed. Helen blinked and looked at the paper towels, then tilted her head back again. Azalea tried to commit her face to memory. She had a single thick eyebrow that almost mirrored the deep v shape of her long mouth. A bright calm shone through the whites of her eyes. She turned to Azalea and spoke in Gen's voice. "Did it stop bleeding?"

"It stopped," Azalea whispered. And Helen left and Gen returned.

Gen raised her gaze, her eyes bloodshot. "How's that shiner?"

"It's fine," Azalea said. "I'm just tired."

"Don't tell your mom," Gen said.

"I won't."

"Because we'll never see each other again if you tell her."

"I know."

Gen took the popcorn kernels into the kitchen. Azalea could hear her throw them away in the trash and rinse out the bowl. When she came back she stood by the blood in the carpet,

looking at it. She fluttered her lips. “I think we got stain remover somewhere, but I’m tired. Let’s go to bed.”

Azalea’s eye didn’t really hurt too badly, it was mostly just swollen. It felt good to be in the bed, to close her eyes. She slept with their backs touching, like they had since they were little, vertebrae against vertebrae, as if they could lock into a single spine. The air warmed between them. At one point in the night Azalea thought she felt Gen’s fingers run over her scalp and down her hair, but she couldn’t tell. Maybe it was Helen. One day it might be hard to tell the difference between the two.

## Chapter 9

When the cousins woke up in the morning, Hilary had already gotten the blood out of the carpet with the stain remover. She made them scrambled eggs and shook her head. “You girls and your roughhousing. Y’all scared the daylights out of Daddy last night.” Linda picked up Azalea from the Hammond County house and honked from the driveway. Azalea could tell her mom had sneaked in a cigarette on the way there because the car smelled strongly of mint Tic-Tacs. Linda winced when she saw Azalea’s black eye. Azalea had a response prepared: Gen had accidentally elbowed her while they were playing ball.

At a stop sign Linda paused to take a closer look. “They put any ice on it?”

Azalea nodded. The lie to her mother felt like it was splintering her insides. As she’d gotten older, she had learned that the way to tell a lie with any conviction was to pay attention to the unknown details. It was entirely possible that Gen’s elbow had been the body part to hit her, she said. It may have been her shoulder. For a while the lie was on going well, except the feeling of wood splintering inside her insides made her feel irritable. Linda tried to chit-chat. She asked Azalea about biology project, the one with nitrogen and the beans that was taking up all the side-board space in the dining room. Linda wasn’t sure if she was supposed to water the beans last night or what, so she did. Azalea shouted — Linda was not supposed to water the beans — and soon they were yelling at each other in the car, their voices trapped and loud. Soon Azalea had tears streaming down her face. She had a B+ in biology, but now it wouldn’t be her fault anymore if she stayed at a B+ because Linda had ruined her project. Linda pulled over at a drive to a horse farm and asked what on earth had gotten into her. There was an iron gate and a small

metal box where someone could enter the code. A few horses in the pasture wore fly-masks, and swatted bugs with their long tails.

“I don’t like you going over there.” Linda put the car in reverse and turned around in the grass.

Azalea kept her eyes on the grazing horses. A little roan foal was sunbathing on its side in the middle of the field. Azalea wished she could sleep that deeply, the way animals do. Suddenly her lie felt like a splinter in her throat. She’d never be able to rest again if she didn’t tell the truth.

Her mother listened silently for a moment. She then puffed her cheeks with air then let the air out slowly. She got out of the car leaving the door open and paced and down the roadside, scaring the horses who had been lingering near the fence. When she was done she came back in the car. “This isn’t your fault,” she said to Azalea. They pulled out of the drive. “It’s our fault. I told your father.” She hit the steering wheel with her hand. “That son of a bitch.” And Azalea wasn’t sure who she meant, her father or Uncle Mike.

#

When they arrived home, Linda let herself into the house ahead of Azalea. The screen door slammed behind her. Azalea stepped into the house while her mother’s footsteps stomped upstairs. Linda returned downstairs with her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. At first Azalea didn’t notice the gun slung over her mother’s shoulder. They didn’t use the gun very often. Occasionally they’d find a half-dead deer or groundhog on the roadside, dying a wretched death. After Vietnam her father swore to never shoot a gun again, so her mother was always the one to take the gun out and put the poor creature of its misery.

“Mom?” Eli was on the couch eating cereal straight from the box, reading a book.

Linda went into the kitchen and dragged a chair into the pantry. She stood on it and reached for the top shelf. A box of bullets fell, scattering onto the floor like baby teeth.

“If you kill him you’ll go to jail,” Azalea said. Even though she was almost certain that her mother wouldn’t kill anyone, she thought this was a good idea to say aloud.

“Kill who?” Eli asked.

“I’m not going to kill him.” Linda picked up the bullets and put them in her pocket.

“Then why are you bringing a gun?” Azalea heard her voice crack. “Why are you taking bullets?”

“Can someone please tell me what’s happening?” Eli asked.

“I’m evicting that asshole living in the house we’re paying for.” Linda pointed the muzzle of the gun downwards and opened the chamber. She pulled out three bullets and put them in her pocket. “See? I’m not loading it. I’m just taking them with me.”

Azalea knew what would happen now. She’d never see Genevieve again. Her stomach fluttered. “It wasn’t all that bad, Mom. He just lost his temper for a second and things got a little \_\_\_”

“Take your sister upstairs,” Linda commanded Eli.

“Mom, if you feel like this situation calls for a gun, then me or Dad ought to come with you.”

“Honey, I’m just speaking his language.” Linda shut the chamber, clicked on the safety, and let out a strange laugh. “Some conversations you have with lawyers, some you have with a forty-five.”

“What happened?” Eli looked at Azalea, and his expression changed from confusion to something inscrutable. “I’m coming with you,” he said to their mother.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours. Watch her.”

Eli and Azalea stood on the porch steps and watched their mother drive off. Eli ran his fingers through his hair and then folded his arms. He wasn’t good with feelings that were not pleasant or ironic. He asked Azalea if she was okay. He patted her on the back and said if it’s mom you’re worried about, don’t be. She’s tough as nails. Then he went inside and got two baseball mitts and a bat, and they played catch for hours.

#

When Linda came back most of her hair had fallen out of her pony tail. She walked up to the house with a slow, weary gate, and stopped in the middle of the yard to light a cigarette. She stretched her hands above her head. Azalea hadn’t stopped playing catch with Eli and was too afraid to ask her how it went. Her brother asked instead, with a kind of glee in his voice. He always liked a revenge story.

“I gave them till the end of the month,” Linda said.

“What’d he say?”

Linda squinted. “Nothing worth repeating. Let me take a look at that eye again.” She waved Azalea over. Linda rested the cigarette on the front step of the porch and examined Azalea’s face in a careful way. It was strange to have someone look at her injury and nothing else. She felt relief at this sense of disappearing, how nicely cold it felt.

“The swelling’s gone down.” Linda straightened up and she caught Azalea’s gaze directly. For a brief moment it looked as if her mother might cry. Then Linda grabbed Azalea by the shoulders and shook her hard. “If a man hits you, you leave him. You hear me? He’ll apologize to you a hundred times and say he’ll never do it again, but he will.” She shook Azalea again. “Do you hear me? Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.” Azalea wiggled out of her mother’s grip. “Jesus, mom.”

“Good.” Linda relaxed. “You can keep playing.”

Azalea turned to resume the game of catch with her brother. The sun was low and soon it’d be hard to see the ball, but were playing the kind of game where she felt hypnotized and determined, and her glove and her throwing arm and the ball all feel like they were the part of the same quiet machine. It was only after her father came home, and her mother stood up and said they needed to talk, that Azalea began to drop the ball. Her mother was yelling at her father in the kitchen. What would happen to Gen, without a mother to shake her awake?

#

Aunt Hilary and Uncle Mike moved out at the end of the month, three hours away to the smaller county where Uncle Mike had family. Gen started a new school and called on Wednesday and Sunday nights at seven thirty. Usually Azalea hovered by the phone starting at 7:15pm, but if Linda or Virgil picked up, Gen would pretend she was a friend of Azalea’s called Stephanie. Gen whispered through the phone so her parents wouldn’t hear her talking. *They sound so country out here, I can barely tell what they’re saying.* The downtown was worse than Hammond’s. There weren’t any restaurants, or quilting stores, or walls with murals of racehorses on them. They only had three blocks of mostly shuttered windows, one diner, an auto body garage, three bars, a roller-skating rink in the basement of a church, and a beauty parlor with an outdated sign of a woman with a seventies fringe. A soiled creek ran through town the color of mop water, and there were signs along the bank that warned against swimming and fishing. The kids at school had never seen anyone wear blue nail polish before. They still permed their hair. They didn’t listen to The Consonants — they listened to country and gangster rap. If Gen climbed a tree she could sometimes get the signal from the alternative station in Arcadia on her

Walkman. She kept practicing the piano even though she didn't have a teacher, running her scales and the first part of Mozart's Piano Sonata Number 11. For some reason she couldn't learn from just listening to the tapes anymore. Moving out there had made her stupid, she said, her fingers stiff.

#

On the weekends Gen went for walks in the woods by herself and listened to mixtapes. She walked until one day she found marijuana plants growing near a flooded granite mine. It looked just like an ordinary vegetable garden at first, except a fence of clear fishing line wrapped around it, and on the fishing line dangled rows of hooks. She learned that the property belonged to their neighbor, a man named Smithy who lived in a horseshoe of four mobile homes, one of which was dedicated to his lizard and snake collection. She hadn't been back to the woods since. A new Walmart had opened by the interstate a half-hour drive away, where teenagers drank forties in paper bags in the parking lot and threw condoms into the ditch. Now she asked her mom to drop her off at the Walmart on Saturday afternoons where she would try on lacy bras and read the mystery paperbacks.

One Saturday in early October her mom was late picking her up. She sat out on the curb eating Twizzlers and watched the sun set over the highway. It was getting cold out and all she had on was a flannel shirt. A few of the kids from high school had started to congregate in the back of the parking lot, playing Pearl Jam loudly from a truck. The guy who was driving the truck walked up the sliding doors. He looked at Gen and asked Gen if she had a light. She did not, so he kept walking into the Walmart. He returned with a bag full of Pepsi liters and a pack of Marlboros. He gave her a cigarette and they started talking. His name was Craig. She was so cold and bored she hadn't noticed that he was fine until they'd talked for a few minutes. Puppy dog

eyes, a good haircut, not a buzz, and broad shoulders and long arms which he used to vault himself over his truck's side, landing almost soundlessly in the bed. He introduced him to his friends, two girls and two guys, and they asked Gen if she was from Cincinnati, because of her accent. She didn't sound like she was from around there, or that she was only thirteen. She looked closer to their age. "Smells Like Teen Spirit" blared from the truck's speakers. Gen's teeth chattered and Craig gave her his jean jacket with a shearling collar. She started to crush on him right then and there.

"You wouldn't like him though." Gen smacked her gum over the phone. "He likes Nirvana but looks like a redneck. He's in Future Farmers of America, goes to 4H Camp and everything." Craig didn't smoke pot because he was in ROTC, but his cousin bought him Coors and her Zima. They drank underneath a railroad bridge between in the x of the iron legs, and kept a lookout while his best friend tagged the concrete side with green-eyed demons he'd drawn in his notebook. Despite all the law-breaking Craig went to church every weekend and told her he was saving himself till marriage, but they'd done about everything else she could think of.

#

When Azalea hung up she knew with certainty that nothing interesting would ever happen to her. No one would ever mistake her for sixteen, she looked like an overgrown twelve-and-a-half-year-old, which is exactly what she was. Her lisp had faded but now her voice gargled when she spoke. Virgil played her a jazz record of a singer with a man's name who gargled too, and the music made Azalea feel like her heart had wadded up into a red handkerchief, and her father told her she might sound like that someday if she practiced. But no one else Azalea knew even liked that kind of wobbling, shivering voice, so she had no use for it.

The next Wednesday Azalea waited by the phone, but Gen didn't call.

#

Thanksgiving came. They flew to Houston to visit her family on her mother's side, the ones who were impressed by her report card and violin playing, who bought her dresses to wear for special occasions, made her Virgin Marys, asked about what books she was reading, and took her to the beauty parlor to get French manicures. Their houses were decorated with antiques and everyone had been to at least one Broadway show. Her two older girl cousins were already in college, studying pre-med and pre-law. They curled Azalea's hair and taught her swing dancing. They all had gone to something called cotillion, and could hardly believe that there wasn't one out where Azalea lived. When she came back she started thinking of calling Gen. Then it was Christmas, then New Years at a friends' house drinking sparkling grape juice. She hadn't heard from Gen in a couple of months.

A blue heart circled the day they would have gone to see The Consonants. February twenty-third. Azalea wore her Consonants shirt to school as a memorial for the missed experience of a lifetime. Gil had stopped sending them postcards after Stefan died. Whenever she went to the grocery store Azalea searched through all the tabloids to see if he was in a picture with the TV actress from *Wild Hearts*, but he had disappeared. There was no news about what he was doing or if he was alive. She tried calling the number in Spain but all she got as a strange buzzing sound, as though the phones spoke another language.

The rest of the month Azalea did her best to be happy. She was 5'7 and when her period came, she knew she would stop growing, finally. Her breasts came in and they weren't supposed to be so large when you developed late. One day she looked down between her legs and saw that her thighs touched. Now whenever she was sleepy and irritable her parents blamed it on her

period. When she talked about the things that were in her mind people gave her strange looks. She wondered aloud how anyone could stand to go to a mall for fun, it was so depressing. And why did everyone find it so easy to believe in God? She was absolutely perplexed by the kids who prayed before the first bell by the flag pole and before lunch in the cafeteria and before track meets by the stadium. She couldn't stop what was in her mind, so she quit talking as much. And then there were the things she could hardly stand to ask herself unless she was completely alone. What had she seen in Genevieve's face? What was the reality shimmering under this one, that writhed like a fish underwater?

She tried talking briefly with Eli about the meaning of existence. He rolled his eye and said they couldn't continue this conversation unless they wore black turtlenecks. He was making fun of her. She slouched away to cry on the tire swing. Eli later left a few books on her bed. *Man's Search for Meaning, Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Catcher In The Rye.* Thanks to Eli, she was at least able to call her unhappiness by its particular name. It gave her some comfort to know that for years, people had looked up the sky without the any certainty or feeling that a benevolent someone was looking back. How strange it was though, that the only people who felt existential dread were the boys in New York and San Francisco. One day she would move to a big city and marry one of them. Then she would have someone to talk to.

#

The first nice day came in March, with little yellow crocuses emerging from under the honeysuckle bushes. There'd be another frost but after that, daffodils. Azalea had taken Ferdinand out for a ride and he was now grazing by the flower beds while she untangled his wintery mane. The phone rang in the house. It kept ringing and ringing even after it went to the answering machine. Finally, someone picked it up.

Her father came out of the house, fluttering his lips. “Gen ran away two days ago. Have you heard anything from her?”

Azalea’s voice trembled as she told her aunt everything she knew. Craig, the boyfriend from high school, drinking under the bridge, the red truck in the Walmart. How he seemed like a nice guy, how he was the secretary of Future Farmers of America, and in ROTC. Maybe ask Craig?

Aunt Hilary was silent, then let out a bitter laugh. “There’s nobody named Craig. God.” Her sigh into the phone sounded like steam. “That girl can’t stop lying.”

“But he goes to the high school...”

“She hasn’t been seeing any Craig,” Hilary snapped. “She’s been going out with a boy name Brandon. Did she ever mention somebody named Smithy?”

Azalea recalled the man who lived in the woods who grew pot, the trailer full of lizards and snakes.

Aunt Hilary groaned. “Brandon is Smithy’s nephew.”

Azalea gave the phone back to her father. He assured Hilary that runaways usually came back before the week was through. His buddy was the sheriff out close to them, a veteran who drove three hours to the VA twice a month for meetings. The sheriff told Virgil not to worry too much. Whatever Gen’s troubles were, she’d find life at home easier than living in a cardboard box.

Azalea went back outside and continued to braid Ferdinand’s hair. Her worry was laced with excitement. Gen was more than fine. Gen was too busy living to wonder, like Azalea, what the meaning of living was about. She was probably out West, working a job as a waitress under a new name, playing piano at cafés, renting her own place above a honky-tonk. One day she’d call

Azalea and tell everything she knew, and all this wisdom would be handed to her like a map to follow.

#

For the two weeks Gen was missing, Azalea went to school like always, but in a strange, disconnected mood. Nothing real could happen yet. The classrooms were brightly lit, the hallway smelled like green beans and dehydrated mashed potatoes. The secret to happiness was not thinking so hard. She ate lunch like normal and didn't tell her friends about her runaway cousin, and she made herself talk and laugh like a normal person so they wouldn't ask her if she was okay. She didn't want to look at their eyes, hungry for gossip, as if Gen's life was the plot of a TV show. Sometimes other people's bad news was like that. Last year a seventh grader Azalea didn't know hung himself from a ceiling fan. His family buried him in his favorite tie-dyed t-shirt. She hadn't felt sorrow, only a numb curiosity. Some kids who knew him cried together in front of their lockers for a while and then no one talked about him anymore.

Life kept happening to other people but not her. Nothing could happen to her yet. As she played the violin in orchestra, she wished for something maim her so she would have a real sorrow to feel and not just the discomfort of wondering things that no one could teach her.

At the end of sixth period the bell rang and the mass of kids walked to the parking lot where the buses were parked. Her bus number had changed so she went searching for the new one. Someone picked up her backpack and dropped it.

Azalea turned around and saw a skinny girl with glasses, her oily hair pulled back into high pony tail. Rosy acne budded on her forehead.

Gen hooked her arm through Azalea's. "Keep looking straight ahead and no one will notice." They walked toward a dust coated black Buick parked at the far corner of the parking lot. "You didn't recognize me, did you? I had to get glasses in January."

"You look taller," Azalea said. But the truth was that Gen was skinnier and this only made her look taller. Azalea felt weakness in the crook of Gen's arm, it light as a bird's wing. They slid into the backseat of the car, scooting over McDonald's wrappers and sweatpants, into the smell of menthols and French fry grease. The driver turned around to shake her hand.

"Howdy do."

"This is Brandon," Gen said.

He looked to be Eli's age, around eighteen. Thin-faced with a buzz cut, he had a tattoo of a cross and serpent on the back of his neck. He glimpsed at her in the rear mirror. "I've heard lots about you."

Brandon turned on the engine. The car thudded forward and bounced over a speed bump as they left the parking lot.

"Where's Craig?" Azalea asked under her breath.

Gen rolled down the window and lit a cigarette. "Craig? We broke up months ago."

Azalea stared at the cross on Brandon's neck when he turned his head to make a left. Maybe he was religious. Religious people were obsessed with being good. Maybe that meant Gen was in safe with him. However, the car smelled nothing like a church fellowship hall. Even Gen smelled wrong. Usually she smelled of cucumber body spray or the bottom of a spice drawer. What was it, what was it, that odor in the air. She looked so different, skinny as one of the models but she wasn't pretty anymore.

Gen let down her ponytail and combed her fingers through her greasy hair. Her clothes were clean but it seemed like she'd been wearing them for days. "My dad went ape shit on me before I left. You see?" Gen smiled and pulled the corner of her mouth back, revealing a gummy red socket where a tooth should have been. The bottom of her jaw had a bluish tint, it was caked over with concealer. Azalea was taken aback. Uncle Mike had whooped Gen till her butt was pink and sore, but he'd never left a mark on her face.

Gen's tongue budged against her cheek. "It's like a bad dream where you lose your teeth. In the morning I wake up expecting to have it back."

"We'll get you a dentist." Brandon rolled down his window, letting in a breeze that blew the fast-food wrappers into a cyclone.

"Take this left up here, baby, where the barn is." She pointed to the road that led to Azalea's house, then turned around. "Brandon here is a genius."

Brandon snorted.

"He's already graduated with community college and he's only a year older than Eli."

"That's cool," Azalea said. Eli was going to Berkeley and her mom wouldn't stop talking about it.

"Brandon can build anything with his hands. He put this car together from other cars, and he can do the same with a computer. What I'm saying is you don't need to worry, because I see you back there, girl, and I know you're worried." Gen talked fast and took a pause to pull ice out of a 7-11 Big Gulp and chew it. She wasn't wearing a seatbelt, and she sat on her knees so that she could face Azalea. Her pupils were black, her forehead shone. "We've got a plan. We're going to make a shit-ton of money. Brandon is going to open a computer repair shop. We're going to buy a house with some property around it — and then we're going to start a farm for

rescue animals. We can do it all on our own if we get a small business loan. The interest rates are good right now. I looked it up at the library and called a lending company pretending to be a secretary. Oh, and I'm going to get my GRE!" She punched Azalea in the knee with excitement. "Did you know they let you into Harvard with your GRE? I mean, Bill Gates who stated Microsoft is a bazillionaire and he dropped out of Harvard. I don't want to go to Harvard, I think I'd like to go to Julliard for the piano, or maybe the University of Indiana since we'll be living there. School is just a fucking waste of life. We should be adults right now, according to biology. Look at you! Look at me! We're grown women. Back in the pioneer days we'd already be pootin' out babies. Remember that book we read one summer? What was it called — the one about the boy who went out to the woods and survived with a hatchet?"

"*Hatchet*," Brandon said.

Gen threw her head back and laughed. "What did I tell you. Ain't he a smarty pants? He's got a photographic memory. Anyway, remember the other book about the Eskimo girl who survived with her wolf out in Alaska? I figure living in Indiana has got to be easier than that, what with grocery stores and running water and McDonald's and everything. Did you now McDonald's will hire you if you're fourteen? Not that I'd want to work there for long. And anyway, we're going to get me a fake ID that says I'm nineteen."

They pulled up to Azalea's drive. Her parents wouldn't be home until five-thirty. Eli was probably at chess club, so they had enough time for Gen to take a shower. Brandon needed to drop off a package for a friend but he would return in an hour. Gen hauled her My Little Pony suitcase from the trunk. They walked up the rest of the drive, under the trees that were starting to bud. Azalea felt more relaxed now that Brandon was gone. She ordinarily never had a hard time finding the right words with Gen, but it felt like she was meeting her for the first time.

“I used to want to live at your place,” Gen said.

“You can still live with us,” Azalea said hopefully. “I bet we could convince your parents. You could have Eli’s room when he goes to college.”

“Your mama hates me. Always has.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Azalea scoffed. Although when she considered it, her mother was as cold to Gen as Aunt Hilary was to her. Gen chattered on about she and Brandon had been doing. They’d been living in the car, for the most part, staying with some of Brandon’s friends here and there. Brandon was dealing pot on the side to earn money — just pot, no hard drugs. Azalea knew plenty of people who smoked weed. They came to class smelling of it and giggled the whole period. Azalea figured that about ten-percent of what Gen was saying was true, and the rest an embellishment of the truth. She decided to ask some questions to test her.

“Why’d you break up with Craig?”

“His mama don’t like me either. None of the mamas like me.” Gen laughed then coughed.

“Your accent is different,” Azalea said. “Like you’ve got a real twang now, Shania.”

Gen laughed. “Oh well. I guess I’ve gone country.” Then stopped and frowned. She looked like she might cry.

“I was only teasing,” Azalea said.

“You always looked down on me for being more country than you.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re kind of an elitist, you know that?”

Azalea wasn't totally sure what *elitist* meant but knew it wasn't good. "I didn't mean anything by it. I just noticed you talk differently than you used to. You're the smartest person I know. A lot smarter than I am."

This seemed to satisfy Gen. "You just have to read books to learn things. School and all that — Jesus, it's a rigged game. If you're an entrepreneur you don't need school. You just act. You can beat the system, having your own business, so that's what we're going to do."

They stepped inside the house. Chaplin came up to them, wagging his tail and sniffing Gen.

"Remember when we played *Julie and The Wolves* and Chaplin was the wolf?" Gen rubbed Chaplin behind his ears. "You got anything to eat?"

Gen ate the entirety of an apple pie without hardly saying a word.

Afterwards they went upstairs. Gen left her suitcase in Azalea's bedroom and went to the bathroom to shower. Something wasn't right with her. Azalea poked through Gen's suitcase to see if there were any drugs but only found clothes and tampons and hair ties. The bathroom door cracked open and shampoo-smelling steam filled the hallway. Gen came out of the bathroom with one towel around her head, another wrapped her chest. Her collarbone stretched through the skin, veined with tendons like a bat wing. Gen had always been on the chubby side. Azalea wondered if she was anorexic or bulimic. She studied the corners of Gen's mouth to see if they were red from vomiting, but they were normal. Gen talked about how good it felt to take a shower. The house of their friends Amy and Alex had the water turned off, so it'd been a few days.

Gen pulled on her underwear beneath the towel then dropped it to put on her red polka dotted bra. Azalea tried not stare but even her cousin's breasts looked smaller, nearly all of her

ribs were visible. Something about her skin looked like a ripe peach about to rot, the skin sinking towards the pit.

“Genevieve,” Azalea gasped. “You’re too skinny. You look like you’ve been in the Holocaust or some shit.”

“I’m on a new diet called stressed the fuck out.” Gen shimmied up her jeans and fastened them with a belt. Her pupils didn’t look as big any more, but the whites of her eyes were red-veined.

“You should stay,” Azalea said. “And you can go to school with me. The schools are better here, you know. Not that they’re great.” Azalea crossed her legs. “We can buy a used piano and you can start playing again. We can start a band.”

“You parents would never let me.” Gen pulled on a sweatshirt. When her head came through her eyes were watering. “Ever since this happened, I’ve stopped believing in God.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing. My dad says it’s a normal phase to go through.” A desperate loneliness welled-up in Azalea’s chest. It was as if her real self only stepped out of the shadows when her Gen was around. She always had the same crazy thoughts as Azalea, but Gen didn’t care if her thoughts sounded crazy to other people.

Gen ran a comb through her hair. Beads of water sprayed off the comb and onto Azalea’s face. “I dropped acid with Brandon a few weeks ago. I was scared to do, but people say that you see God when you’re on it. I really wanted to see him, and you know, have a talk about the shit that has been going on in my life. But God wasn’t there. There is *something* there but it’s more like an *it* than a *he*. I don’t even really know if you can call *it* God. You know that animists believe there’s a spirit in every single thing? I think that’s what I believe.”

Azalea sat up on her knees. “Can you get me some?”

“Once things settle down.” Gen leaned forward. “We can do it together. You can tell me what you think *it* is.” Her eyebrows were unplucked and growing into a v shape that looked like a pencil drawing of a flying bird. Azalea remembered Helen had thick eyebrows. They made her look serious.

“Maybe that’s why your face changes sometimes. Because of the *it*. Because there’s an extra spirit in you.”

“That stopped a while back, for some reason. I think I got too old.” Gen reached beneath her sweatshirt and rolled on deodorant that filled the room with the scent of baby powder.

“Anyway. I still believe in ghosts. Even if God doesn’t exist.”

“You said she was an angel.”

“Nah, she’s a ghost.” Gen kept on running the comb through her hair even though it was straight. “I was wondering if you had any money I could borrow.”

“For what?”

“Gas, food, toothpaste. Shit you need money for.”

Azalea had eighty dollars saved up in a hollowed-out book on her shelf. Azalea tried not to look in that direction. She stared at her cousin square in the face. “Are you doing drugs? Other than acid and pot?”

Gen snorted a laugh. “Are you serious?” She rolled her eyes. “Girl, you have been watching too much TV. No, honey, we just smoked a little weed before we came to pick you up.” She sniffed and put the comb up. “It’s like a glass of wine, and better for you.”

Azalea felt herself blush. “I still haven’t tried it.”

“I’ll leave you some.” Gen rummaged through her suitcase and took out two joints from a Mentos tin. She tossed them to Azalea. “Don’t smoke them all at once.”

Azalea stood up and placed the joints in the lower drawer of her ballerina jewelry box, which twinkled the first line of “Somewhere Over The Rainbow” before she snapped the lid shut. When she turned around she saw that Gen was near tears. Her temples were spotted red.

“What’s the matter?”

“Zalie, I wouldn’t ask you for the money unless I really needed it.” She swallowed visibly and shook her head. “I can’t go back home. Not now, not ever.”

“Which is why you should stay with us.” Azalea sat down on the bed. “I can convince my mom, I swear.”

Gen looked straight at her. “If I tell you something will you promise to believe me?”

Azalea nodded.

“My dad,” Gen’s voice trembled. “He didn’t just hit me in the face. He touched me everywhere.” Her cheeks flushed. “*Everywhere, Zalie.*”

This took a moment to sink in.

Gen bit her upper lip. “Do you get what I’m saying?”

Uncle Mike may have been a lot of things but he wasn’t a pervert. If anything, he was always worrying about them getting raped. He’d tell them boys were only after one thing, and that they shouldn’t walk around the front yard in bikini tops because a pedophile lived down the road. But most of all, Azalea knew that her own father was a reader of minds. If her father even suspected that Uncle Mike was the type to molest his daughter, he would have never let Azalea go near any of them. Uncle Mike might have knocked Gen’s tooth out but he’d never touch her like that. He’d never ever. Azalea’s chest tightened.

“Don’t you believe me?” Gen looked at her with giant eyes.

Azalea sat on the bed and placed her hand on Gen's back, startled by the hard ridge of her spine. Maybe her cousin was on drugs after all, saying something that extreme. Maybe she was making it up to get the money. The way she had made up the boyfriend she never had, the one who went to church but was a graffiti artist, the one who bought her Zima and took her horseback riding. One day, when things were better, Azalea would make her tell the truth.

"Don't go," Azalea said. "You can live with us."

Genevieve stiffened. She looked around the room and blinked. "Your bedroom is too small."

"We can get bunk beds."

"You don't believe me, do you?" Gen wiped her eyes and then burst out with an uncontrolled sob that came with such force that Azalea was sure it was fake. "I can't believe that you don't believe me."

"Of course, I believe you." Azalea said calmly. "It's awful, it's disgusting." In an unwilling flash, she pictured Uncle Mike reaching into Gen's underwear. Azalea shuddered. "It's just shocking, ok? It's not something I want to think about. Did you tell anyone at school?"

"You've got to be half-dead before they put you in another home. And then they put you with a family that is worse. Like, religious homes. Moms who don't wear pants or cut their hair." Gen blew her nose in a Kleenex by Azalea's nightstand. In seconds she had pulled herself together, her back straight. She talked as if she hadn't been crying three seconds ago. "I promise I'll come back. I just need a couple of weeks to get things figured out. I promise." She stuck her hand up in the air, as if she was taking an oath. "I swear on the God I don't believe in."

Azalea couldn't help but laugh. "You swear?"

Gen nodded. She might be a liar but she never broke a promise.

Azalea went to her bookshelf and pulled out a green hardback of poetry by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The pages were glued together, carved out of the hollowed center was a neat rectangle where she saved up her allowance, birthday money, and money for watching the kids next door. It amounted to eighty-three dollars. When she took it out she felt like she was making a mistake. Gen should stay and live with her. But what Gen said about Uncle Mike felt like a kind of hostage threat, a gun she was holding up to both their heads.

“I don’t see how you’re ever going to get legally emancipated.” She handed Gen the money. “Drew Barrymore did but she’s a movie star. They don’t even hire fourteen-year-olds at McDonald’s full-time.”

“If that’s the case then I’ll go home and stay till I’ve got no teeth left. Jesus,” said Gen irritably. She looked at the wad of cash without counting it, and stuffed it into her purse. “What were you saving it for?”

“I dunno.”

“Sure you do.”

“I’ve still never been to a concert. No one good ever comes here.”

“Bands come to Indianapolis all the time.” Gen’s voice brightened. “I’ll buy you a ticket when I get a job. We’ll go together.”

“That’d be nice.”

“You believe me, don’t you? About what my dad did? You swear on a stack of Bibles?”

“I believe you,” said Azalea. “I swear to God. Even though we don’t know if there is one.”

Gen smiled. “Come help me.”

Azalea sat on the suitcase as Gen zipped it up. They walked down the stairs. Gen passed the white sheer curtains on the stairwell. “These always looked like bride veils to me.” She draped the gauzy curtain over her face, then took a few steps forward so that the curtain slid over her head, falling back into place. Gen spoke as if it had been a very long time since she had come by the house, years and years instead of a few months. As if they were all grown up and remembering the way things had been.

Gen talked about the future. She and Brandon would have their own apartment with a water bed and an indoor pool. She would graduate from high school at sixteen, she was smart enough to do it. She’d make enough money to take piano lessons again. She might really play at Carnegie hall one day like her old piano teach Mrs. Leroy had told her. The cousins walked down the driveway almost touching arms. Gen would call when she got to Indianapolis. There were a few errands Brandon had to do first. “I know you don’t like him but he’s the smartest person I’ve ever met,” Gen said. “He could fly an airplane just by watching someone do it, I swear.” The dusty black Buick waited at the end of the driveway. The speakers blared Metallica. Brandon’s hand held a cigarette out the window.

Gen turned to Azalea. “Don’t tell anyone I was here or where I’m going. If they find me they’ll send me back home. I’ll wind up dead.”

“I won’t.”

“Don’t cry,” Gen said. “I’m going to be alright. There’s only one way from here and that’s up.”

“I’m not crying,” Azalea said. Was she supposed to? Her heart sank. She wanted to wrap herself around her cousin’s legs and not let go. The plan was never going to work and she ought to save her cousin the trouble. Gen would break up with Brandon — no one ever sticks with their

eighth-grade boyfriend. Gen would discover, as Eli had, that working fast food was a kind of hell. She would come back to Kentucky. Azalea would convince her parents to let Gen live with them, and they would say yes on the condition that Gen take a drug test every week. Virgil would buy the white bunk bed from Sears. Gen could have the top. All of it was a matter of waiting. Gen wouldn't listen if Azalea tried to stop her now.

“Don't try to stop me.” Gen said it in a way that challenged her to try.

Azalea felt a sadness so intense it was like a physical pain except she couldn't locate where it was. She wanted to slap her cousin for causing her this pain.

“I ain't gonna stop you.” Azalea folded her arms. “It's your life.”

The cousins gave each other hugs. When they were little their hugs lasted until one of them fell over. Now they hugged like adults, a light circle of the arms followed by a few quick pats on the back. Azalea wanted more than anything to topple her cousin over but Brandon was waiting, and even though she didn't think much of him she somehow managed to care about what he would think if she acted like a child right now. Azalea waited until the car pulled out of the drive. She went back inside to clean up the pie tin and the plate Gen had left in the sink. She'd tell her mother that she dropped the pie on the floor by accident and had thrown it in the trash. She took her backpack to the dining room table and laid out the contents. Math and chemistry and social studies. The less she thought about Gen, the easier it would be to lie to her parents. By the time Azalea went to bed, she hardly remembered that Gen had come by.

## Part IV

### Chapter 10, 2007

“How convenient to faint right when it’s time to do dishes.” Eli handed Azalea a plate of saltine crackers and a cold can of Sprite. She sat up to take a drink and then lay back down, feeling like an air bubble had risen to her head. The fainting was attributed to Eli’s moonshine mixed with the cold medicine Azalea had taken earlier that morning, lowering her blood pressure till the lights went out. At least this was her mother’s theory. Linda came by the couch every three minutes to make sure Azalea hadn’t fallen unconscious. Gil had gone outside for a walk and a smoke and had not come back. Virgil went outside to chop wood. He came back with an armful of logs which he loaded into the black Franklin stove. The cast iron kettle steamed humidity into the room. After washing his hands, he put on his reading glasses and insisted on looking at the bump. A little knob stuck out from the back of her skull but it had stopped hurting, what with two Advil and a cold pack. The combined attention of Linda and Virgil would make anyone feel recover faster, if only to escape their fussing.

The cats Malachite and Jasper had curled up on her legs. Her right foot was falling asleep, there was nothing good on TV. Harvey, their aging Labrador, snored loudly on his dog bed. When she went into the kitchen everyone shooed her back into the den. Azalea protested but ended up on the couch with a fresh ice pack and a mug of herbal tea. There was nothing on television except football and *The Christmas Story* and *Die Hard*. She watched without paying attention, spinning Genevieve and Helen’s faces in her mind until they looked like two plates of color glass overlapping. An angel or a ghost. It hadn’t mattered to her in years, what Helen was.

Azalea had tucked her away. She neither believe or disbelieved that such a thing had happened to her. It had given her something like faith but only gentler.

For a year after Genevieve's death, Azalea had prayed for her spirit to visit, speaking quietly to the darkness of her room. For a year she had expected her cousin to appear, it seemed like it was a natural occurrence. Virgil had seen his dead mother in a jungle in Vietnam. Linda had seen both her grandparents after they had died. The dead did not always carry important messages or warnings or predictions or directions. They simply showed up, their mere presence a comfort. But Genevieve had never appeared to Azalea despite all the talking to the dark, despite the wish which felt like a need.

Clive's number flashed on her cell phone as it vibrated on silent. She let it go to voicemail, surprised that he would call her on a holiday. She wanted to isolate him from the rest of her life. But curiosity got the better of her. She picked up the phone and listened.

His tone was professional and formal: Hannah Gibbons had gotten a part on one of those musical cruise ships and was leaving the theater, effective immediately. They were looking for someone to take on the role of the Ghost of Christmas Past. Would she be interested? She was the first person he thought of. He apologized for calling during the holiday and wished her a Happy Thanksgiving.

She sat up, excited.

Another part, and a good one! Then she hesitated, a deep shame building in her chest for feeling so excited, not just for the part but that he had asked her. She felt the urgent need to stand. How could she possibly think about anything so trivial in moment like this one. Regional theater and her nonexistent acting career didn't matter one bit next to life and death and everything she'd learned today. She steadied herself on the couch's arm until the blood returned

to her head. The mystery of Helen might never be solved but it could be confirmed. In the attic were piles of boxes, full photos and memorabilia. There might be something of Helen's up there, hiding in the storage. She snuck past the kitchen where the TV was on and her mother and brother washed dishes. She walked quietly up the stairs, avoiding the steps that creaked. In the hallway ceiling on the second floor, a string dangled with an O-ring hook. Azalea pulled on it with all her weight. The ladder unfolded itself like a paper crane, and she climbed up.

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She could sense the empty space around her although she could not see it. The air was cold and smelled like an antique store. Old trunks and particle board. Her extended her arm into the darkness and felt the wall for the light switch. A yellow bulb turned on from the highest part of the ceiling where the roof peaked into an eave. Stuffed animals from her childhood pressed their faces against white plastic garbage bags. Her brother's board games and card games were stacked into a crooked tower on top of a plastic storage containers. There was the dollhouse her mother wanted to give a granddaughter someday. There was the wooden pine rocking horse that had been Eli's and then hers.

She passed a low bookshelf with embarrassing titles from her father's 1970s reading list. *Your Erogenous Zones*, *The Joy of Sex*, *The Edgar Cayce Remedies*. Now he mostly read books about the Civil War. Next to the bookshelf was her mother's watercolor easel from when she briefly reconnected with that hobby after Eli and Azalea had left for college. In the corner was the railroad trunk that belonged to Azalea's great-grandmother from her maternal side, loaded with fans and handkerchiefs and a wedding dress vacuumed sealed in a plastic bag, and the diaries she kept from ages twelve to seventy. Her mother's side of the attic took up the most space. They were well-documented and fondly remembered, poor Bohemians who sunbaked into

prosperous Texans, opening bakeries that sold kalaches and shoe stores that specialized in custom-made cowboy boots. Azalea squeezed herself among the stacks of boxes. All the memorabilia from her father's side fit inside a shoe box. It was so small she might have easily missed it. The font was from the sixties, advertising a pair of man's dress shoes from Montgomery Ward.

She sat on the railroad trunk and took the lid off the shoe box.

The man who would terrorize her father was still a small boy, kneeling in the second row of the orphanage, looking straight at her. His chin raised, not a monster at all but a child who communicated his misery through a blank stare. He looked in desperate need of a hug. She bit the inside of her cheek. Everyone in the world had once been a helpless small animal, immobile and dependent, swaddled in a blanket. She wanted to reach back in time and kidnap her grandfather and raise him as her own. He could sleep in a cot in her living room. She would teach him to hold baby chicks in his hand and not squeeze the air out of them. She would comb his hair and sing him songs so he wouldn't hurt his children. He would never make anyone afraid and the future would be changed. She herself would be changed in some way too, even though she was the recipient of her father's hard work. She had been born into luck while her father had made himself out of ashes. She was born freer than him. Only at some point she had caught herself on a snare but that was entirely her fault, she had no one else to blame. For a long time, she had felt a sadness like a heavy ring she grown accustomed to wearing. She did not consider this weight to be unique, but an inescapable part of the human condition. Only right now it seemed that this weight also had a personal origin.

The boy looked out from the first row. She could not save this child who had been her grandfather. She tried not to think about him.

Azalea thumbed through the rest of the photographs twice to make sure there weren't any of Helen. The saw dust air scratched Azalea's throat. She remembered she was sick. Where Helen had come from, who her parents were, what songs she liked, her favorite color, that had been swallowed up by death. Still, there was more that remained of Helen than most of the countless people who had walked the earth, who died and took the entirety of their story with them. Azalea's heart beat faster as she thought about it. They were all so very, very small.

The ladder creaked with footsteps. Virgil's head appeared through the hole in the floor. "You should be resting." The floor shook as he climbed into the attic. He crouched beneath the low ceiling. "What are you doing up here anyhow? You're sick, girl."

Azalea stood up and dusted her hands off on her pants. "I was just looking through some old photographs." She sounded sicker than a few hours ago. "I wanted to see if we have any pictures of Helen."

"Hilary has one." He put his hands on the small of his back and stood up in the tallest part of the room. "Your mother has decided that she wants to decorate the tree tonight." He grabbed several boxes of Christmas ornaments and placed them under his arm. Azalea offered to help carry them and he reluctantly gave her the smallest box. As she climbed down the stairs the box fell out from underneath the lid, green and red glass balls shattered on the floor. Azalea stood on the last step, barefoot, stranded.

"Shoot," Virgil said. "I'll get the broom. Just stay right there."

Azalea sat down on the middle step. She judged the distance between the ladder and the clean piece of floor beyond the shattered ornaments. Normally she would have taken her chances and jumped across it, but her fever was coming back again, blooming up her neck and into her head. She shivered. While she waited she read a few of the titles on the bookshelf in the hallway

by the ladder. *The Autobiography of George Washington Carver. The Catcher In The Rye. Mutiny on The Bounty.* When her father was younger, his favorite place had been the town library. Because he always the strongest boy in his grade, no one dared to pick on him for being a bookworm. Azalea reached over to the shelf and picked up *Oliver Twist*, reading the cover insert. Virgil often hid the books from his own father, who was ashamed that he couldn't read and teased Virgil for having his nose stuck in a book whenever there was a free moment. Virgil ended up doing much of his reading in the outhouse, until one day he left behind the library copy of *David Copperfield* on the bench. His father found the book and ripped all the pages out to be used as toilet paper. Virgil peered down into the smelly tank where half the pages lay crumpled in the shit. He brought back the remaining pages to the library with his head hanging low. *My dog got to it*, he told the librarian, an older woman whose only words to him, in all of his weekly visits, were reminders of due dates and the daily fine for late books. He was sure he'd never be able to step foot in the library again, but the librarian took the rest of the pages from him and tidied them neatly into a stack. *I've got a dog too*, she said, and forgave the damage. When he told Azalea this story as a child she had laughed at it — her grandfather appeared in all of his stories like a badger or wolverine, his actions not so much cruel as untamed. She understood now, the kind of life her father really had. When she heard the stairs creak beneath her father's weight she placed *Oliver Twist* back onto the shelf. She knew the truth now.

“Lord, Lord, Lord,” her father said, as he walked up the stairs. His eyes were wet. Of her two parents he was the one most easily moved to tears — old country songs, Easter hymns, any movie where a horse died or a child was separated from its mother. She should have been used to it by now, but seeing him tear-up always made her nervous.

“What's the matter?” she asked.

“I was just thinking about you and Genevieve,” he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “You two were peas in a pod.”

Normally Azalea would have made a noise of agreement and change the subject, but today it seemed like the sort of thing a child would do. Her throat was on fire.

Her father did not stop sweeping as Azalea recounted the afternoon Genevieve had come by their house, to take a shower and borrow eighty-dollars from Azalea’s savings, or about the boyfriend in the car with the snake and cross tattoo on his neck. She told him how Gen’s ribs poked through her sides, and how she lost a tooth. By the time she was done talking, all the green and silver glass shards had been collected in the dustbin. It felt good and easy to talk. It felt like laying down something heavy. Her father nodded and said *uh-hm* in all the right places. He was not angry or even bothered. She began to feel unsettled by her father’s calm. He appeared to be waiting for the thing she wasn’t saying. He brought a pair of her mother’s house shoes to put on, to protect her feet from any tiny glass fragments stuck between the boards. When she stood up she felt dizzy and hot, her mind just shaken awake from a dream. “Genevieve said that Uncle Mike hurt her. He knocked out a tooth.”

Her father fluttered his lips and pushed up the attic ladder back into the ceiling. “I can’t say I’m all that surprised. Sometimes that happens, people get more abusive when they move away from family.”

“That’s not the only thing she said he did.” Azalea’s face was scalding hot and she was filled with shame that wasn’t her own. She couldn’t look at her father. “He touched her all over, is what she said. He molested her.”

Virgil sat the broom and dust pan by the banister, and let out a deep breath. “Jesus,” he said finally. She managed to look at him. Every muscle in her body had turned rigid. Her father

rubbed his face. He was used to dealing with this kind of thing. It was the world. “Part of me suspected, especially when he got so rough with both you girls. I started to wonder. I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. Damn.” He shook his head, his face pale. He rested his hand over his mouth and breathed through it. “Damn.” He let out a long sigh.

Azalea’s throat was parched. “I wasn’t sure if I should believe her or not. It was too awful to think about. And I thought she might be playing it up, to get more sympathy.” She hesitated. “You don’t think she was lying?”

“No,” he said. “He never—with you—”

“No. Never.” She leaned against the wall. It was feeling hotter and hotter upstairs. She waited for her father to comfort her but he did not move from where he stood by the banister.

“I think,” he said slowly, “part of me knew how bad it was. For a while I thought about telling Hilary that Genevieve could stay with us — but then I got to thinking about you and your safety.”

“What do you mean my safety?”

“I mean you would have jumped off a cliff had Gen told you to. She had a powerful kind of influence on you.”

“Of course she influenced me. We were cousins.” Azalea threw up her hands and laughed with disbelief. “You were her uncle.” This came out as an accusation even though it was just a fact.

“My job was to protect you, first and foremost. And I failed to do so, that night Mike gave you the black-eye.”

“He didn’t hit me. He hit Gen.”

“He hurt *you*, Zalie. And he hit his daughter. She was troubled and she only grew more troubled.” He puffed his cheeks with air and let out it out. “By the time I figured out what was going on, there wasn’t a whole lot left that I could do.”

Azalea stepped back. “What do you mean ‘figured it out’? You mean to say you knew?”

“What I meant to say was that I suspected, after that night.” Virgil looked at his daughter plainly. He nodded his head and blinked as if agreeing with a voice inside him. “I did suspect it.”

“Suspected? What was it going to take, Dad? Were you going to have to catch him the act?”

“It was too awful to think of.” Virgil let out an exhausted sigh. “Part of me couldn’t believe Hilary would ever let it happen to her daughter. Not after it happened to her.”

Azalea let out a hoarse laugh. “We could have saved her life.” She reached up to ponytail and tugged it. The full horror came to her, she had looked away so long, and now it was right there with them. “I can’t believe you knew and didn’t do anything.”

“I did it for your safety.” His look hardened. “When you’re a parent you’ll see what I’m talking about.”

Tears rolled down Azalea’s face.

“Honey, we did all we could do,” said her father. “I know it broke your heart when she died.”

“We let her die.” Azalea could hardly breathe. She had touched the thing she thought was buried and it stirred.

“Hush.” Her father pointed at her, one eyebrow raised. “We did not let her die. You need to stop this nonsense. Right now.” He stood up to his full height and rolled his shoulders back. She remembered that look of his! When she came in past curfew or when she yelled at her

mother. As a child it had made her stiffen with fear when he deepened his voice and stuck out his chest. He was bigger than her. Even in his late fifties with bad knees and arthritis, her father could have picked her up and sent her flying over the banister. That was why he grew taller right now, to let her know he could seize her if he wanted to.

An anger blazed within her. She walked up to her father till she was nearly touching him and pointed a finger at his chest. “How many women in our family have to get molested before you do something?” Her voice was so hoarse it came out a whisper.

“Azalea.” His face wilted.

Her neck was wet from tears. She paced up and down the creaking wooden floors, her hands clutching her head. “You always said doing the right thing is worth it. I just don’t understand. Why you didn’t do the right thing by Genevieve.”

“You don’t think I wish I could have saved her? It was impossible to save her without ruining you. She was not *my* daughter.” He hit his chest with his palm. “By the time I even began to suspect the kind of things Mike was capable of, she was so damaged, nothing could have set her straight. It was too late for her.”

“Listen to yourself talk,” Azalea hissed. “She was fourteen years old when she died. She was a *child*.”

“And so were you! Which is why you didn’t notice her behavior. Genevieve had all the signs of a borderline personality disorder.” He counted on his fingers. “She was promiscuous, she was a manipulator, she lied through her teeth, she abused drugs, she was self-destructive, she was caught up in fantasies, she had no real sense of herself. You can’t fix someone like that. Trust me, I tried doing right by Hilary who is cut from the same cloth, and honey, it does not work.” He voice grew steadier. “You can’t treat people like them. They can’t be helped.”

“I seriously can’t believe you’re pathologizing your dead niece right now.” Her father stepped forward as if to comfort her. She held up a hand. “Don’t.”

“You grew up in an awful place.” Azalea pulled her hair, the pain sealing back whatever was shaping out. She managed to speak. “And now look at you. You made it out. Gen could have made it too.”

Azalea shrank up when her father approached her in two long steps. His face was inches in front of her, his look wrathful and begging. “Don’t you go feeling sorry for her now. Let me save you some time, sweetheart, you can’t save some people. Some people you hand over to God.”

She snorted. “You going to stand there and tell me that Jesus didn’t want you taking care of your own kin?”

Her father’s laughter cut her to the bone. “You want me to feel bad? It’s a waste of time. I pulled myself out of a goddamn pit because I got lucky — I was born with a better hand. It sure as hell ain’t my fault that’s what I was born with. It ain’t your fault either.” His eyes welled up. “You had everything I could give you and more. I wasn’t about to risk that. Not for Genevieve, not for anyone.”

As if someone pulled a cord in her head, she stopped crying. A numbness set in. She did not want to be dead but she also did not want to be alive right then if it meant that she was lucky and Genevieve wasn’t. She had the urge to hurl herself over the banister, or reach her hand into the trash and stuff a handful of broken glass in mouth. The hallway pulled into focus. The bookcase by the wall stuffed with records and paperbacks. Her mother’s dry cleaning hung on the bedroom door. A family portrait of them in the front yard when she was seven and Eli was twelve and Gil had left already. Her father stood before her, looking breathless and tired. As a

young man he had eaten his fill of the dark and couldn't swallow anymore. There was no room for the past in his house and so there was no cure for it either.

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And so she went downstairs, grabbed her coat and bag which hung by the door, and stepped onto the porch into the freezing night air. Thick flakes of snow drifted down and sideways. The quiet chimed like the end of a church bell. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her uncle, dressed in a black coat and sitting by the space heater, a guitar lying flat across his lap. He lit a cigarette. When he exhaled the smoke mixed with steam from his breath in a cloud in front of him.

Gil leaned forward in the rocking chair, strumming a chord on the guitar. "It never feels as quite as cold when it starts to snow. You ever notice that?"

"It's got something to do with the humidity." Her face was still damp. The cold air dried the salt on her cheeks. She looked at her uncle, who turned the pegs on the guitar. It was his guitar. He brought it with him on the plane from wherever along with his other luggage. He must have thought they might all gather and listen to him play and sing songs together.

"You want to sit down a minute?" He asked. He must have heard her fighting with Virgil

"I'm good."

Gil played a few bars on the guitar, and then began to finger pick tune that sounded from the mountains. It sounded familiar but then again, a lot of those old songs did. Her uncle began to hum and then he began to sing the lyrics. He had a nice throaty voice like a country musician. The song was about Jesus, but it was a strange song about Jesus in that it felt reverent without being religious. Azalea couldn't remember where she'd heard it before so she remained on the porch, listening and trying to remember. A hush fell upon her as the music played. Her pulse

softened. Snow graced over the white hills. A few moments passed and she forgot to think about where she'd heard the song. Then the notes seemed to tap on her chest. For the life of her she couldn't remember where she'd heard the song played before. She listened until it was over and then looked at her uncle, who had gone into another song, a Spanish one, a song that made the guitar pluck like a harp. Her love for him, it was a sort of homesickness. The snow fluttered up in the air like white moths. She could have listened to him on the porch for the whole night, but when he finished playing the second song she told him she was leaving. He nodded his head and stood to embrace her, propping the guitar onto the chair. She was grateful that he did not try to stop her from leaving.

## Chapter 11

As a small child Azalea had thought *The Christmas Carol* was a horror movie. It contained a surprising number of ghosts for what was supposedly a season of light and hope — door knockers morphed into faces, dead men dragged chains behind them, the grim reaper pointed a long bony finger to the grave. But it was The Ghost of Christmas Present that scared her the most. He was the Father-Christmas-looking one, fat and tall as the ceiling, feasting on a banquet in the room next to Scrooge's bedroom. He seemed so jovial and friendly at first. Then, toward the end of his visit, he lifted up his long robes.

Two dirty waifs with long matted hair and hollow eyes clung to his legs.

Azalea covered her ears and screamed in shock. Eli tried to console her through his laughter. She had to be carried out of the room by her mother and taken upstairs to her parents' bedroom where she watched *The Princess Bride*. When she went to bed the waifs appeared in her mind. It confused her that these children had been hiding under the robe of a generous, merry spirit who looked like Santa Claus. They no longer seemed fully human, but had the matted, neglected look of dogs left out too long on a chain.

The next morning, she put *The Christmas Carol* into the VHS player and fast-forwarded to the moment where the children were revealed. *Their names*, said the ghost, *are Ignorance and Want. They are always with us.* She started the movie from the beginning. Somehow they had been there all along, clinging to a pair of legs over London chimneys and rooftops, starving while the Ghost of Christmas Present feasted, growing large and fat. It seemed like he could have at least handed them a turkey leg. But she noticed, on the second viewing, that the ghost was forgetful. He repeated himself like an elderly person whose memory was fading. This seemed to

carry a significance which she didn't understand. On New Year's Day, she watched the movie a third time with Genevieve, who did not flinch but burst out laughing when the robes were lifted and the two waifs appeared.

She explained the moral to Azalea. The only way to enjoy a feast was to forget Ignorance and Want.

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Megan powdered Azalea's face white and added a silvery highlighter at her brow and cheekbones, and blue-gray eyeshadow over her eyelids. Azalea was approximately two thousand years old, a very tall-looking child in a white gown that came to the previous actor's ankle but hit Azalea below the knee. The wig hadn't fit well either, so Megan sprayed Azalea's hair with gray, then fixed it into an elaborate Marie Antoinette styled coif using cardboard, hair spray, and a dozen bobby pins.

"You look like Mrs. Haversham," Megan said, "but young and hot."

During the one-and-a-half-hour makeup process, Azalea learned that Megan was an avid reader, a Renaissance Fair enthusiast, and had carpal tunnel syndrome from her days as an airline stewardess. She worked on a mostly volunteer basis for the theater. She would have gotten a degree in costume design at NYU but her parents told her she had to stay in Kentucky, so she went to Morehead State and majored in English, got pregnant smack dab in the middle of her Master's degree with twins, and was now thirty-two, and praying to the Goddess that she got accepted into UK's Ph.D. program so she could write a book about Africans in Renaissance Europe because she was sick of white people at Ren Fairs telling her, a biracial woman, that she shouldn't be there because historical accuracy, or that she should really only play the pirate wench. Her husband was Leif, the lead set designer whose long blond hair came to his waist and

a Viking's broad stature. Leif played the most aggressive death metal Azalea had ever heard, but was very gentle and spoke infrequently and with such softness that he was barely audible, especially over the headset. It was why they worked so well as a couple, Megan said. He found it such a relief not to be responsible for to keep the conversation going, to have someone make the chit chat. Megan observed that Azalea was awfully quiet, for an actor. Azalea admitted that she was usually more talkative, and obliquely blamed her reticence on stress. Law school apps, the holidays, family drama. Maybe she should be like Leif and never talk again except in a whisper. Maybe the secret of people listening to you was barely saying anything at all, that way you surprised them when you spoke.

When Megan put on the finishing touches — a fog of hairspray, more highlighter on the brows and cheeks — Azalea did not recognize herself. Her skin shone like moon dust. The image in the mirror reflected herself at age seventy and also at age nine. "I'm not sure if I look very young or very old," she said.

"You look immortal," Megan nodded, smiling with pleasure at her work.

Hunger and Want, Megan and Leif's twins, chased each other around the dressing room. Their golden hair had been teased at home and they looked like Victorian chimney sweeps but plumper. Megan reminded them they had to be quiet backstage, that she had a backpack of books and coloring for them to do, and also the DVD player and headphones. "Show Azalea your urchin faces," she told them. The children stilled. Leif Jr.'s eyes grew wide and pitiful, Ostara's showed a starved blankness of expression.

Azalea applauded.

"I wish we had lines," said Ostara. "All the adults have lines."

“You don’t need lines when you can say everything with your face. Who am I?” Azalea imitated Ostara’s hungry blank stare.

Ostara laughed with recognition. “You’re Want!”

“Wait, you’re not Want,” said Leif Jr. “I’m Want, you’re Hunger.”

“I don’t really see the difference,” Ostara sighed, and the twins began to bicker. Megan finally gave them the DVD player and headphones to keep the peace and sent them off to the hallway.

Once they were out of earshot Megan lowered her voice. According to Leif — who could not have helped but to have overheard the conversation while he was replacing a light fixture in the hallway — Joanne and Reginald were actively trying to find a replacement for Clive. Something about angry letters from the principal donor’s daughter and meetings with attorneys.

The gossip made Azalea’s heart skip with anxiety — she couldn’t understand why Megan was confiding in her, then realized it was because, throughout the entire hour-long process of makeup and hair, Megan had made it very clear that she thought Clive was an abusive asshole, and Azalea did not come to his defense. For the most part she agreed with Megan. He had been disrespectful to her on than one occasion, she even said. Megan eyes widened and she lowered her voice. “I heard,” she muttered, “that he basically sexually harasses the women. That he even made a comment on actor’s breast cup size. Can you believe it?” Megan rolled her eyes and tugged Azalea’s hair too hard. “I mean, any other place, he’d be fired for that crap.”

Azalea sat very still and looked down at the floor.

“That was you!” Megan gasped. “Oh, sweetie.” Megan shook her head and stepped back so that they were both looking at it each other in the dresser mirror. “I’m so sorry you had to put up with that.”

Azalea swallowed. “It’s fine. I’m over it.”

“Men are disgusting. I mean not all of them.” She rolled a piece of cardboard under a curl and sprayed it. “But most of them.” She looked at Azalea again with nothing but empathy and solidarity. If Azalea face hadn’t been coated under two layers of shimmering platinum makeup, Megan would have seen her blushing. She felt attracted to a man who was not good while knowing he was not good, and this probably made her a morally compromised person. She swore to herself that she would never betray her own integrity, and maybe even something bigger, maybe all of womankind.

Megan must have noticed that Azalea was uneasy. She tried to console her. “It happens to all of us, at some point or another. Men, they just—” Megan made a face of disgust. “It’s nothing you did wrong. I hope you know that.”

Azalea nodded. Her voice was still hoarse from being sick, and she gave this an excuse not to talk.

Joanne, the co-director, entered the dressing room, her long, dark red peasant skirt trailed behind her like a dancer’s scarf. One of the original cast members of The Local Company, she now directed the annual holiday production and worked as a lecturer at the university’s theater department. She wore handmade dangling earrings, had long chestnut hair streaked with grey which she wore up in a bun, and spoke at all times with the silken voice of a trained actor. There was never a single vowel which she did not carefully enunciate, no direction she did not project from her abdomen, no sentence interrupted by an *um*, but rather a long and intentional pause.

This all gave Joanne an aura of confidence which was almost intimidating, despite her art-teacher style and her fondness for breathing exercises and Tai Chi. There was a steeliness that lay underneath her buttery vowels. During a Board meeting she had thrown a pencil at Clive and called him a piece of shit. Clive said *The Christmas Carol* was a trite piece of Victorian sentimentality and suggested it should be cut from the production list, despite the fact that it historically sold more tickets more than any other play.

Joanne came by the chair and squeezed Azalea's shoulders. "This is marvelous. You're a moon beam, Azalea. And Megan, you are amazing. This is a fabulous Ghost of Christmas Past. How are you feeling my dear?" She looked at Azalea in the mirror with warmth.

"Fine," Azalea said. Her voice sounded like she was talking through a grate. She'd been sick for a week after Thanksgiving. No amount of warm water with honey and lemon would make her voice go back to normal.

"Don't say a word until you're on stage. Just whisper and point until then. And maybe try relaxing. We still have half an hour." Then Joanne let out a long exhale. "Break a leg, sugar." She darted off to see how Leif was dealing with the set.

"Isn't it nice to have a director who isn't a total dick?" whispered Megan.

"Such a relief," Azalea mouthed. It wasn't a lie, exactly. Joanne was an excellent director — very effective, although lacking in brilliance. But who needed brilliance all the time? Working with such a confident, mature woman had corrected Azalea's thinking about Clive. You could not flirt with or sleep with a mean person for the sake of self-exploration. How ridiculous, to have even considered it. In a matter of weeks, she had grown older, wiser. She looked in the mirror at the crown of silver hair piled onto her head and shone like a queen. A rare thought

came to her. *I am beautiful*. She didn't need Clive, she only needed this, to be someone else now and then, if only for a little while.

#

“A piece of undigested beef!”

Reginald bellowed like a drum. He was best as the lead, he thrived on titanic feelings. His role in *Nonesuch Creek* had been a small supporting role. A saloon owner, only in the final act. He seemed bored and impatient then uninvested. He had taken Clive's direction seriously and then seemed to ignore it entirely and then finally, Clive began to ignore him. Azalea had been puzzled as to why Reginald, a senior member of The Local Company, hadn't pushed back more when Clive berated the actors. Every once in a while she would sense Reginald watching a conflict with note-taking eyes. He was biding his time, she realized now, building an argument. It wasn't that he had no need for approval; he was in it for the long haul. He and Joanne were set on getting Clive fired. She couldn't blame them.

Azalea listened to the first act backstage. The nervousness she felt beforehand was always the same. A fluttering in her chest. Sweating palms. A constriction in her throat that gave her a stifled cough. Really the nervousness was a helpful little whirlwind of panic she could trap in a sail. She had memorized her lines in three days. The more she thought about the more she became convinced that The Ghost of Christmas Past was not an otherworldly phantom, but a part of Ebenezer, an impulse of love that wished to save himself from the misery of greed, a cortisone surge in the form of a ghost.

She went out into the hallway to fill up her water bottle and read through her lines one more time. Ignorance and Want sat on an old couch, lost in *Harry Potter*. The air was freezing. Reba and Matt and Ben stood with their arms threaded backstage, a blanket thrown over their

shoulders. Reba gazed at Azalea as if they'd known each other for years. She was one of those actors who made a lot of extended eye contact and had a genuine interest in everyone's life. It was such a relief to be around well-adjusted people again. The only odd-person out was Emily, who hadn't joined the love-fest under the blanket but was sitting quietly in full Victorian lady costume on the torn leather couch with her closed eyes, listening to one of her guided meditations. She had asked Reba to tap her on the shoulder when it was her cue. Reba confided early on to Azalea, that Emily really drank the Kool-aid when it came to Clive. She had even signed up for a retreat to Clive's ashram in New Hampshire.

Matt gestured for Azalea to join them under the blanket and suddenly Azalea found herself under Reba's arm, so that now at least one half of her body was warm but the blanket didn't reach to Azalea's side. Reba quit shivering after a minute. Azalea felt herself growing too warm. A comfortable drowsiness made her yawn.

She needed to wake up, to stick her head out of the back door and catch a breath of the cold air. She slipped out from under the blanket and quietly exited through the hallway.

The emergency exit swung open as she walked down the narrow hallway.

Clive wore a black coat and a green scarf wrapped around his neck, his face staring down at the floor and his brow furrowed, lost in thought. She put her back to the wall so that he could pass her. He walked by wordlessly, as if no one was there. Before she had time to feel rejected, he stopped and turned around.

Men weren't supposed to look at women the way he was looking at her now, as if she were a painting in a museum, a half-naked girl draped over a chaise lounge. A month ago she would have dropped her eyes to avoid him. Now she slowly blinked and looked straight at him, feeling the curve of a smile form at the corners of her mouth. She wasn't supposed to enjoy the

kind of attention he gave. He raised his eyebrows, and gave her a nod of approval. When he left she could still feel the sensation of his gaze, a heat it left along her body, that made her clench with desire. She wasn't supposed to enjoy or want what he possessed. There was something wrong with her, but there was no time to fix it. Her cue was in fifteen minutes. She opened the exit door and the cold wind knocked the breath out of her.

## Chapter 12

“Some tall guy in the lobby is here to see you.” Hayley, the stage manager, peered her head around the dressing room doorway. “He looks...important?” She blinked rapidly through her cat-eye glasses. “And like maybe he’s related to you?”

“That’s probably my uncle.” Azalea started collecting her things stuffed them into her bag.

Hayley whistled. She was thirty-eight, recently divorced, back in the game.

“Don’t even. He’s a giant mess,” said Azalea.

“Got it, got it.”

“I want to meet him!” Reba cried. “Bring him out to pizza with you.”

“Maybe.” Azalea sighed and blew an air kiss behind her shoulder. He was probably here as an emissary from Virgil. Azalea hadn’t spoken to her father in the weeks since Thanksgiving, and only spoke a few times to her mother to let him know that his daughter wouldn’t be around for Christmas this year. She’d be spending it with Tanya in Chicago.

#

Gil was in the front lobby, dressed as usual, in black and gray, with the brown vintage leather boots. He held himself lazily as he flipped through the local weekly. He had found sophistication in the last twenty years but he looked like he could fuck up someone in a fight. Maybe because he used to have a mohawk and it had permanently changed his aura. He used to prep the mohawk with egg whites in the kitchen and she would test it before he left for a show, pretending it hurt her saying *ouch ouch ouch*. Now he looked like a father to his younger self. He looked like he

had money and he looked like he'd been in a band and he looked like he'd been something else in his wild years. All true.

He dropped the weekly back into the kiosk, spread out his arms and gave Azalea a bear hug that seemed undeserved, seeing that she had only just seen him a couple weeks ago. He stood her back and looked at her, eyes crinkling and sparkling in a way that made her feel extremely young. He was glad he'd come for the show. Virgil wouldn't stop with how great she was, same with Eli. They'd set the bar very high and to tell the truth he'd been skeptical, it being a community theater and all, but she did not disappoint. She brought something to a rather stock character, a vulnerability to an immortal spirit. He wasn't sure how she pulled it off.

"A lot of hair spray," she said. "And a good makeup artist."

"Nah." He punched her on the arm. "You have The Thing."

"Thank you," she said, pleased.

"Virgil sure did talk you up a lot."

She bristled at the mention of her father.

Gil raised his eyebrows. "I came here to see you but, tell the truth, your father did ask me to put in a word for him and his righteous cause to save Christmas."

Azalea let out a sigh,

"Your father," Gil said, "is a good man. So good that it's hard to for him to see himself as anything else. Which makes him..." He seemed hesitant. "Insufferable."

Azalea burst out laughing.

"I don't mean to offend."

"Not at all." It was a relief, talking someone who found Virgil's impeachability a bit much.

“He’s a saint,” Gil continued, “And saints are a pain the ass. They put unreasonable expectations on the rest of us.”

“Being good is overrated,” Azalea said. This was a new thought she’d been having.

“I’m with you, sweetheart.” He rubbed his hands together. “Let me take you out. How does a steak sound?” They started walking towards the revolving doors. “I’ve got a buddy who just opened a place on Main. I think we might have an hour or left.” He looked at his watch.

They headed towards the revolving doors. She could see their reflections as they passed the large lobby mirrors. George was looking at them. Cindy from concessions was looking them. Hadda from ticketing was looking at them. Her uncle had a spotlight effect on people. You stood next to him, and suddenly others paid attention. Unless she was on a stage she always wanted to dim herself, but Gil never did. He never turned off.

“I always had a feeling you’d be an actor. I mean it! Remember how you got into Virgil’s fishing tackle and took out all the rubber bait? You made them into a play.”

“It was a worm opera,” Azalea corrected him.

“I really am so proud of you. Don’t give me that look now. I know it sounds corny.”

They slowed down by the photographs of The Local Company in the 1980s. Reginald’s hair was in a natural, Julia’s in an alarming, frizzy perm.

“This theater is a gem,” Gil said quietly, “but why stop here?”

“Dude, I’ve done the starving artist shit.” She ran her fingers through her hair and there was silver white powder on her fingers. Megan had sprayed her hairline that color to blend it with the wig. “And I’m going to be twenty-six next year.”

“Exactly. You’re still in diapers.”

Azalea rolled her eyes. “The actor’s life is—you know. It’s not that stable.”

Gil was no longer listening. Clive was watching them both, hands in his pockets, across the threshold in the main lobby.

“I think I know that guy,” Gil muttered.

“That’s Clive Harris. He directed the last show I was in.”

Her uncle’s face tightened. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Gilbert Stuart.” Clive’s voice echoed across the lobby. The name rang out in a theatrical sort of way, the way a ghost might call someone’s name from beyond the grave, except it wasn’t silly at all, it was trying to grab her uncle by the ankles. But Clive made no movement from where he was. She glanced at him briefly. His expression was strange, she couldn’t decipher it, only she hadn’t seen a look on his face like that before, neither desire or annoyance or self-assurance or hostility.

“Let’s go,” Gil repeated.

“Wait, how do you know him?” Azalea pushed through the revolving doors and out in the cold. No one ever called her uncle *Gilbert*, as far as Azalea knew.

Gil slowed down to light a cigarette. “Long story.”

They continued a few steps.

“We have some time before the restaurant closes, I think.” His voice didn’t sound the same. It was at a higher pitch.

“You owe that guy money or something?” Azalea teased.

“I owe him an apology.” He blew out smoke and it mixed with the steam of his breath. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.” He looked at her cheerfully. “It’s your night, yeah? And I know we can’t catch up on everything that’s happened in the last twenty years but let’s try to start with the last week or so.”

“I would like that.” Azalea smiled, but remained unsettled. The look on Clive’s face came to her mind. She couldn’t tell what it meant.

Gil chuckled, as if he’d been thinking to himself. “I’m always surprised by who leaves Arcadia and who stays. I thought I wouldn’t know a soul. But this town,” he sniffed, “there’s nothing you can do to change it. Take that over there.” He gestured to the square by the courthouse. “That statute is a Confederate general, and right on the other side of the street is where they sold human beings. What kind of asshole thinks it’s a good idea to put up a monument to a person who defended human trafficking and torture.”

“A racist one?”

“A sociopathic one.” He extinguished the cigarette in a lamppost then threw the butt into an overflowing garbage bin. “That general there is related to that director of yours. The Harris’s put that up. Most of Kentucky fought for the Union for fuck’s sake, and these rich horse farm people go and put up these statues to rewrite history so that their people-owning grandfathers look like heroes.”

Azalea thought this was banal. “I’m sure we have our share of racist assholes in the family, Gil.”

“While that is most certainly true, ours were too busy surviving typhoid and tapeworm to own people. We rose from the bottom of the barrel. They may have been white or mostly white, but they were always under the thumb of the ruling class.” He nodded towards the statute. “The Harris’s.” His voice crackled with contempt. When he was a teenager he had a black t-shirt with the words “Eat The Rich” written in duct tape.

Azalea followed her uncle across the street, almost running to keep up with him. “Clive actually mentioned that he knew you. From the old music scene.”

Gil didn't respond. He lit another cigarette. A small group of young people, also smoking, huddled on the corner in front of the town's oldest gay bar. Although it was 2007, the bar was still almost comically discrete. There was no sign or marquee, only a steel door and a low narrow strip of dark windows, tinted green. None of the smokers wore coats. As they passed, Gil lifted his cigarette in the air as a salute. "Fucking smoking ordinance, right? Forcing you poor children out into the cold." He tssked.

They laughed. "Government ain't gonna tell me what I can or can't do to my lungs!" Azalea recognized two of them from her walk to the office. They passed each other on their bikes every day. A girl with a buzz-cut and a nose ring and boy with ear gages. They looked too young to be at a bar. A muffled pulse of dance music crept out of the building, like it wasn't the dead of winter but the first days of spring. Gil throat kicked with the beat. It was a Friday. Doors opened, releasing music into the atmosphere before snapping shut again. The night life in Arcadia was limited but once in a while enough people decided that the town belonged to them and they were no longer going to wait for something to happen. They were going to hurl themselves towards excitement. Tonight, Azalea felt, might be one of those nights. Something would happen.

"I can't believe they still tint their windows at the gay bar." Gil shook his head. "Like it's 1992. Maybe it's thrilling to feel like an outlaw." He no longer seemed thrown off by the encounter with Clive. He was lively, churning with ideas. A friend of his in London could tell Azalea all about auditions. Azalea was selling herself short, that was the problem. She could never grow in a place like this. He should know. He learned twice as much in those first three months in Berlin than he ever had in Kentucky, and it was because he hadn't been the best there.

"We thought you had gone to Madrid," Azalea frowned.

Gil waved his hand. "That was only a brief stop." Over Thanksgiving no one mentioned those days when he left without a word, when he was young and hungry and she was a small lonely child. While she sulked around the house he was out there, recording with newly liberated East Germans. Then at some point she retired him to the box of people who used to be important but weren't anymore. Middle-school friends lived there, first loves, college roommates. She wasn't sure why she was letting him take her out for a nice dinner now, as if they could make up for lost time. He didn't seem to pick up on any of this, but continued talking about the difference between a porterhouse and a filet mignon, and aged steaks that you could cure for a year, and beef from Japan, from cows spent their lives being massaged to better the marbling. He wasn't paying attention to her anymore, she realized. He owed everyone an apology but her. She should leave and go home, give him a taste of his own medicine, but she was starving and a steak sounded amazing. The wind carried a smell of charred meat and baked potatoes.

The restaurant door sign read closed and staff were removing white tablecloths. *Buena Vista Social Club* played loudly on the speakers. Gil tapped on the door and a waitress came to answer it.

"Hey, I know you're closing up but is Tom around?" Gil asked.

"He's left for the night."

"Shoot. My niece and I here, we had our hearts set on a filet mignon. You know anywhere else nearby that's still open and has like, an ethical bent?" He glanced at Azalea and teased her. "She's uh, concerned that the cows are treated fairly before they become steaks."

The waitress laughed. "No one else I know of does local beef, if that's what you mean."

"I hear you're giving Champagne Steakhouse a run for their money."

The waitress smiled. She was in her thirties with red hair pulled up in a bun, pearly straight white teeth. “We’re open to eleven on Saturdays.” The waitress looked at her uncle. “How do you know Tom?” She gestured for them to steps inside, out of the cold.

“We go way back.”

“He’s at The Bar if you want to drop in and say hi. They’ve got decent hamburgers. A few of us our headed over there in a minute.” She leaned against the hostess bar. “It’s drag night.”

Gil raised his eyebrows. “Back when I knew Tom he was a great Madonna. We’re talking the Material Girl years.”

“It’s ‘Dolly Beg Your Pardon’ now.” Her eyes glimmered and she tilted her head, exposing her long white neck. Gil seemed to notice, but barely. He was too busy loading his pockets with the Andes chocolate mints from a bowl on the hostess counter. He seduced people without meaning to, it wasn’t his fault.

“I can tell you’re hungry.” He handed Azalea a mint as they went outside, heading towards The Bar to see Tom and eat hamburgers and possibly orchestrate a future date with the waitress. Azalea didn’t know if she should help her uncle along or warn the waitress that he was a lost cause. She felt less angry at him now, eating a chocolate mint.

“I’d really try to help your acting career in some way.” Gil topped walking. “I’m doing that thing deadbeat dads do?” He looked sheepish. “Where you try to make up for years of neglect by overcompensating.”

Azalea shrugged. “It’s fine, really. And anyway, you continued to encourage me even after you left. All those postcards. They made me want to see the world.” Why she was placating

him? Why wasn't she telling him the truth? That he had been irreplaceable? That she waited by the phone hoping he'd call on her birthday for three years in a row?

"I guess I'm glad I had some kind of positive influence." He looked downcast. It worried her, this look. She wasn't sure what to say to cheer him up, only that she couldn't let him apologize because that would mean she would have to forgive him. She told him about her time as actor in Chicago, to fill the time. About how Tanya broke her arm and couldn't afford physical therapy, and now her arm was going to hurt her the rest of her life.

They arrived at The Bar, where the bass was so powerful it rattled her sternum. The downstairs was relatively empty. A few patrons in the circular booths with red pleather seats. The place smelled like it had just been cleaned. Candle wax, soda water, Windex.

They paused a moment to take off their coats. She remembered her uncle was in recovery.

"You sure you're fine hanging out in a bar?"

He winked at her. "You're my babysitter now? I'm fine."

They sat down on the barstools to order drinks before going upstairs.

"I'm glad that mirror is still hanging." He nodded to the ornately carved gold mirror to the side of them. "A famous madam owned it, by the name of Belle Breezing. She was a sort of an icon among the old gay crowd—I'm glad they've kept it." Gil told Azalea how on Sunday mornings Belle would have her girls dress up in their finest clothes, and they would get into horse drawn carriages, riding around town just as church was letting out. If they didn't like a man they'd say wave hello to him and call out his name, embarrassing him in front of his wife and minister. He leaned his elbows on the bar. "They were probably more influential than the wives of the richest men in town."

Azalea nodded. "Soft power. The power of the powerless."

“Never to be underestimated. This here is a Diet Coke, right? No liquor? Thank you.” He took a sip. “You see? I’m careful.”

There was just enough room in the stairwell for two people to walk side by side. They carried their drinks in their hand, rising into the song. “That mirror downstairs,” he said. “Your great-grandmother, the infamous one, she worked in that same brothel. I found it mentioned in one of her arrests. She probably looked into that mirror a hundred times. Strange to think about.” He slowed down to catch his breath. “I hear you’re looking for a picture of her? Hilary has one. You’re welcome to come with me to visit her in a couple of weeks, if you want.”

Before Azalea could respond he passed through the curtain and she followed. They were in another world now on the second floor. Gold sequins, warm glowing skin. A beautiful queen whipped her hair. There were tables arranged around the stage, and black support beams holding up the low ceiling.

Gil applauded with everyone else, setting his glass on a standing table. “A lot of the queens back in the day did their own singing.” That may have been true but the Beyoncé had done very well for herself and glistened happily. She took a bow and blew kisses. A pair of lesbians in felt hats came to the stage and tucked money into her dress. Every table was full of people, and the center of each one had glass candles and Christmas tinsel. Large green and red wreaths hung up by the curtains on the stage. There was something always so wholesome and naughty about a small town drag show. A blond and a redhead took mics and asked a woman wearing a bachelorette tiara to come up on stage and show them how big her fiancé’s dick was.

When the music lowered, Azalea went to use the restrooms down the hall. While she washed her hands her phone rang. It was Clive’s number. She answered it, closing up her opposite ear to block out the noise.

“Hey. I’m at a bar. Can you text?”

“I don’t think I have text.”

“What is it then?” It came out more impatient than she wished.

“Can I meet you? At the bar?”

“I’m with my uncle.” Azalea leaned against the sink. It was a single stall bathroom, filled with graffiti and a plastic air reed diffuser filled with scented pine oil.

Clive was silent.

“I’m sure you’ve got your reasons not to like him—most of us do. But that whole thing back at the theater. That was awkward and you know, maybe not appropriate to shout someone’s name like that? In a public space?”

“I should have told you sooner about how I know him, that night at your apartment. I just want you to know that none of it changes how I see you, or how I feel. Otherwise I wouldn’t have—”

“Clive,” Azalea began. “What’s are you talking about?”

Clive paused. “I think we should probably talk. In person.” She could hear him switch ears. “I probably shouldn’t have called. I don’t know what got into me. I’m sorry.”

Clive had gone from never apologizing to apologizing to her profusely. She twirled a piece of hair around her finger.

“Something is going on between us,” he said. “It hasn’t happened yet but it will. And before it does, we should clear the air.”

“You sound very sure of yourself.”

“Why don’t you come over later? You can think about it some more, after we talk.” He continued. “I’ll text you my address.”

“I thought you didn’t have text.”

He breathed into the phone. “I lied.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I wanted to hear the sound of your voice.”

“Hmmm. My sex phone operator voice.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ll think about it.”

As she exited the bathroom her phone buzzed with his address. It might ruin everything, seeing where he lived, the laundry basket or the ring of mold around the bathtub drain. There was a formality to their relationship, a distance which she enjoyed. Even so, she was curious. She might discover what it was he held over her, if she could see where he lived, and how. As for sleeping with him, she wasn’t sure about that. She’d have to see about the other thing first, this frantic thing he simply had to tell her. Probably just an excuse to call her. Some girl he and Clive had fought over twenty years ago. A stolen checkbook. A broken nose in an alley.

Back at the booth the waitress sat next to her uncle. She was all by herself, changed into a black sweater, her curly red hair halfway down. Her uncle was telling some kind of story. The waitress leaned the side of her cheek into her right hand, listening.

We all fall for the same shit, Azalea thought.

Dinner was pleasant enough. They ordered too much food, burgers and potato skins and artichoke dip, and for a while they attempted one of those bar-conversations that is mostly just yelling above the music. At one point, Gil stood at the end of the stage and stuff dollar bills down the ample bosom of Dolly Beg Your Pardon, who screamed with delight when she recognized Gil and planted him red lipstick on either cheek. He’d been her first love, back when

she was a baby queen and he was just a straight boy who liked to put on a dress. Such a tease.

“Don’t let him break your heart now.” She winked at the waitress, who laughed and hid her face in her hands.

At least the waitress was age appropriate, and friendly. She was taking her kids to see The Christmas Carol next Tuesday. Still, Azalea couldn’t help but resent her for interrupting this time with her uncle. The woman’s fingers circled around the base of her margarita glass as Gil talked about his plans to open up the distillery with an old friend of his. He’d been looking at properties in Washington County all week.

Gil seemed to only be interested in the woman half-heartedly, but he’d also quit talking to his niece. The woman mentioned that she wasn’t a waitress at all, but the restaurant’s business manager who knew people in the whisky business. Azalea’s uncle was leaning in now, asking questions about tour buses for the Bourbon Trail, how that might be arranged. He talked like a man who didn’t much care that an hour before, someone had shouted his name in a way that begged him to turn around. Azalea had the growing feeling that whatever had passed between the two men was more than an insult. Gil now was talking with gusto, at the full expanse of his charm. Her uncle would forget himself with this nice woman, who didn’t know he was full of shit. Or that he was cowardly, which is why he hadn’t stopped to look to answer Clive. Which is why he had never called Azalea, or apologized for leaving. He would never apologize to her because he must have known she would never forgive him.

She lost her patience.

“It was so nice meeting you.” She extended her hand across the table, giving the woman a look which she hoped communicate a warning. *He just got out of rehab*, the look said. *He probably has kids he knows about but never sees.*

“Yes!” The waitress held out her hand and their two hands met in a cold grasp. “Excited to see your play with my daughter next week.” She smiled back in a way that seemed to say *I know what it means when a man orders a Diet Coke at a bar.*

Outside the winter air stung Azalea’s cheeks. She felt an energy snap through her that could have been anger but she wasn’t sure. It dawned on her that she forgot to look at the famous mirror before leaving, the one that must have reflected Helen’s face a dozen or a hundred times a when she worked at the brothel. Azalea almost turned around to see it, and look into for an explanation, but stopped herself. A mirror couldn’t remember anything, could solve nothing, could tell her nothing. Gil had told her a useless story. Azalea would never fully understand what she had witnessed as a child. She ought to let the mystery be, that’s what her father would do. Consider it a blessing. Consider it a miracle. But miracles were supposed to help you, weren’t they? They were supposed to tell you good news.

There was the smell of snow that hadn’t fallen. There was a darkness that all the downtown lights couldn’t drive away. She wanted to hand herself over to it.

## Chapter 13

Brass numbers were nailed discreetly onto the porch beam. Azalea checked Clive's address on her phone again to before walking any further. The house was nothing like his personal style. Everything about the house was elegant and tidy, new brown paint on the wood beams, pine green shutters, Japanese evergreens trimmed along and a pebbled path with low lights. He lived near the park in one of rehabbed Craftsman the neighborhood was known for. She would have bet money that he owned one of those insanely expensive reading chairs that she often saw in the homes of the well-educated, successful people whose children she babysat back in Chicago. The chairs were ugly, like dentist chairs, but extremely comfortable, with a little ugly footstool that matched. On more than one occasion she'd curled up in one with her laptop or a coffee table book on Frank Lloyd Wright, waiting for the parents to return from a fundraising gala.

The door to Clive's house swung open before she could the doorbell. He held a glass of amber liquor in his hand and smelled like alcohol. Gone was his nervousness, his urgency. She was going to tell him upfront that she was never going to sleep with him but it seemed that wouldn't be necessary. He greeted at her with the mild interest of someone greeting a plumber.

When she stepped into the house she almost laughed. One of the expensive, ugly reading chairs flanked the fireplace, upholstered in worn-in brown leather.

Clive didn't offer to take her coat. She noticed there was a pile of shoes stacked neatly on a shelf in the entryway, so she took off her boots and put them off to the side. Then she sat down in the ugly chair while he clinked bottles around in a brass bar cart.

"What are these types of chairs called?" Azalea slid off her coat and put up her feet.

"Eames chairs," Clive said. "You like them?"

“They’re comfortable,” Azalea said.

Clive laughed. “I take it you’re not a fan.”

“No, I love them.” She took her wool hat off and looked around the living room. Books filled the wooden built-ins around the fireplace, mixed in with interesting objects such as a large jade hook and a piece of coal that ran with gold seams. Art hung in frames on the wall. A brown-skinned woman wrung out a cloth over a washing bowl.

“What are your thoughts about Scotch?” He held up a bottle.

She wrinkled her nose. “That it tastes like Band-Aids.”

“How about bourbon?”

She didn’t like that either but said yes. He poured her a shot, then disappeared briefly into the kitchen for ice cubes. A round brass mirror hung over the fireplace. There was a soft looking dark-blue blanket draped over the arm of a gray couch. Everything was very well-curated, suggesting years of a steady, aesthetic gaze and hours browsing through flea markets. She remembered he was older than her, and felt stiff with self-consciousness. She was no longer sure what she was doing in his house. He came back from the kitchen and handed her the cold glass. She took a sip to be polite. There wasn’t any music playing in the nice speakers on the bookshelf. Had there been music playing she would have felt much more at ease. The music could have signaled what he expected, and instead she didn’t know.

Clive sat down on the couch. He wasn’t wearing black today. He was wearing a red plaid flannel shirt. He looked like he’d gotten a haircut, or perhaps he had just washed and combed his hair. The faint smell of shampoo floated around. He seemed trimmer, more chiseled. He had high carved cheekbones, a charming broken nose. In the dim light, surrounded by nice things, he looked almost like a model in an upscale catalog for down coats and wool socks.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “What all this is about. I must have missing something.”

Clive spat an ice-cube into his glass. “Your uncle didn’t tell you about how he knows me?”

“No.” She blinked. “Why would he?”

“I should have said something when you told me he was your uncle. It would have been less awkward.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell me anything,” she suggested. “Maybe it’s better that it stays between you and him.” She sipped her drink and it burned her throat.

“Do you want to know?” He was dying to tell her. He looked so eager.

She shrugged. “I don’t think you can say anything that would change the way I feel about him. He’s my uncle, and he’s fucked-up but he’s a good person. Deep down.”

Clive let out a laugh and wiped his eyes. “A good person. I suppose that’s not untrue.”

He was trying to create intimacy between, she realized. He was trying to bring them together with a secret. She didn’t want to be together with him in that way. She wanted to like him in the way that he liked her, on the surface, for his beauty and power, for the thrill of having something forbidden.

“I don’t think I want to know about it,” she frowned. The ice sweated in the glass. It left a circle on her jeans.

“I understand why you wouldn’t.” He nodded. “But keeping secrets—it makes everything bigger than it needs to be. I don’t believe in manipulating people, I believe in telling them the truth.” His eyes glistened. “You’re a beautiful person, Azalea, both inside in out.”

She felt embarrassed when he said this. But she wanted him to say it very badly. She wanted him to admire her and she wanted this admiration to be barely within his own control.

Her face burned with shame, for this wanting. If she was content with who she was, he wouldn't have had this effect on her. Infatuation would have been impossible if it hadn't been for this need for others to see you, and tell you that they liked what they saw.

His expression shifted. "I have too much respect for you to not tell you the truth. Your uncle and my sister, they used to go out. Back when she was in high school and he was in college. She's one whose room you found, in the attic." He cleared his throat. "Anyway. He probably never even mentioned it to his family, I'm guessing"

"I don't remember your sister." She looked down at her drink. "But I take it that she and my uncle used together?"

"He got her hooked on the shit." He stood up to refill his glass. "And then he got her pregnant. He ran off to Europe after promising to marry her. My parent, being so religious, they wouldn't let her get an abortion, and she was only seventeen. So they sent her to rehab, where she had a late-term miscarriage. Technically a still born. Courtney starting using again as soon she got out." He sat back down. "And then one day she drove her car off a bridge."

It only hurt a little, she thought. In a way, none of this was new information. She thought of Stefan of The Consonants. Her uncle had likely been involved for deaths of more than one person.

"I thought that if I saw him again I would want to," he threw up his hands. "Hit him? I don't know what I would have done. Instead I just saw him." He shook his head. "He's gotten older. We both have." His jaw was stiff, as if he was gritting his teeth. "He looks very well."

"He's not really," Azalea said. "I don't know if that's any consolation." She wished he hadn't told her. For some reason her heart was hurting more. It shouldn't hurt so badly. She found herself holding back tears. She wondered if this is why he told her, so that she would hurt.

Clive asked her if she'd like another drink but she hadn't finished the one she was holding. She sat it down on a coaster.

"I should get going." She wished he hadn't said anything. If he wanted her to feel closer to him with this revelation, he had not succeeded.

Clive nodded and stuck his tongue in his cheek. "I understand. But I had to tell you. I realized that it might interfere," he gestured to the space between them. He looked at her intensely again, gave her a lopsided smile. "Ever since that night at your apartment, I can't stop thinking about you."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but this." She sniffed. "Bit of a mood killer."

"I know you lost someone too," he said softly. "That's what happened, on the last performance of *Nonesuch*, wasn't it?"

She avoided looking at him. She started to put on her coat. "Everyone loses someone eventually, Clive. It just happened to us both earlier than most people. That's all it is. It doesn't make us special."

"It doesn't make us special," he said. "But it makes us alone."

A darkness fell over his face. What was lying underneath it? She felt something quiver and nearly recognized it, but off it ran like a forgotten name. Something unlocked. It became very clear and still, their suffering. If they moved it might startle.

They sat in silence and time slid by. She was reluctant to move. And then she changed her mind. She wanted to move toward that ache, to know the shape of it. She took off her coat. She walked over, sat beside him on the couch, and stroked his face. It was brittle, warm. He closed his eyes, holding his breath. He leaned his face into the palm of her hand and the warmth of his exhale ran along her wrist. When he was not being cruel or strange he became more

beautiful, and she could see that softness in him which she liked so well. She kissed him. She slid into his lap to feel how hard he was. When she straddled him his belt buckle pressed against the inside of her thigh. They kissed until he stopped and rested his forehead against her clavicle. He asked what she wanted him to do to her.

“No,” she stretched out past him to turn off the lamp. “What do you want me to do to you?” She cupped his face in her hands.

He was silent. He placed his hands on either of her hips, sighing. “I think you know already.”

She was confused for a moment, then flinched. “That’s not my thing,” she couldn’t help but laugh. “Sorry.” She placed her index finger in his mouth. “Think about what else you like.” He pulled off her shirt and bra. He squeezed her breasts and sucked on her nipples. His cock was still in his jeans, pressing against her. She clenched herself, sensing she should come this way, wondering if she ought to. They stopped.

She helped him slide off his shirt, then the t-shirt underneath. They moved to the ottoman.

“What else do you like?” she asked again, unbuttoning his shirt. She pressed her breasts into him. The span of his chest felt solid and thick, and she felt quicker than he was, more limber, and she enjoyed this agile feeling it gave her.

“Do you remember, what you told me that night at the party?” he said.

“I remember.” She reached into his pants, moving her hand back and forth.

“Tell me that,” he said.

She waited a few moments. “I’m going to fuck you up the ass,” she whispered. The sound of her own voice mixed with his breath made her skull tingle.

He let out a moan.

She shifted away from him, surprised at the sound he made. But she didn't stop. She pulled off his pants and then slid off her underwear. She wanted him to make that sound again.

"I'm going to fuck you up the ass with this giant cock I've got," she said, straddling him again. There was a condom in his wallet. She found it and put it on him, but first he put his hand on her clit. He circled his fingertips around. Something of him entered her just then, a burning inside him she could feel the heat from and now it was hers. Then she drew herself over his cock. It made her feel the contours of herself, where she started, where she ended. She felt herself tighten as she rocked back and forth. She asked him to pull her hair. An orgasm rippled up her body, through her fingers, through the crown of her head.

"Tell me again," he asked her.

She whispered in his ear and then embraced him as he came.

#

Upstairs it was messier. A laundry basket full of clothes, a chest of drawers in the bedroom, three cardboard boxes stacked in the corner. She had walked up the stairs naked to go pee, since the downstairs toilet wasn't working, he said. The bathroom was very clean, even the floorboards. There was nothing in the trashcan except a used razor. She didn't want to get to know him in any other way, but she opened the medicine cabinet, just to see. Between the toothpaste and the night guard were two bottles of prescriptions, none of them with familiar names, pills the color of poisonous snakes, none of them party drugs. She shut the cabinet door.

When she came back down the stairs he asked if she wanted to spend the night. He had pulled on his t-shirt and boxers and finishing his Scotch on the Eames chair.

“I should get going.” She found her underwear on the floor by the couch. “I don’t usually sleep well, outside my own bed.” It was hard to go back to normal when they never had a normal to begin with. She wasn’t sure how to proceed, so she started looking for her clothes in the dark. They shouldn’t do it again, she decided. There were bifocals on the coffee table. This couldn’t be a habit. She was leaving soon. She was young, he had returned to the place she was fleeing, some part of him must have been yearning to make a life. It’s why people came back home. She wanted only the part of him that she had just seen, and now that she’d found it and she wasn’t sure what to do next.

“I really,” he coughed. “I really would like it you stayed.” He pinched the top of his nose. “And I think you will feel better about this if you do.”

His neediness surprised her. She didn’t want to remain close to him. She suspected that if she stayed he would say something mean, and she would feel used.

But she didn’t want to be unkind. She ought to soften up a little. She went to him and picked up his hand, turning it over in hers, avoiding his eyes.

He put his hand behind her neck and pulled her toward him. “We don’t have to talk.” She looked up. His eyes were soft. She wanted to hurt him but didn’t know why since he was not being cruel. She had wanted him to see her, but somehow, she had only seen even more of him, and if this continued he would continue to reveal more and more of himself, at her expense. She would fade. It wouldn’t continue after tonight.

“Alright,” she said. Thinking of the old *yes, and*. How it was a good rule to live by. How it could surprise you, saying *yes*, or it could hurt you terribly and ruin your life.

“Thank you,” he said.

They went upstairs to the bedroom and lay down. The ceiling fan spun around in the dark. He asked if he could spoon her. She said yes, mostly because she was cold. It was uncomfortable. He wrapped an arm around her and within seconds his breathing deepened, she slid his arm off of her and made her way to the other side of the bed. She found that she didn't want to leave anymore. He had been right, it did make her feel better. This was very unexpected. She did not touch him but lay close enough to feel his warmth. She had never felt safe around him, it was why he excited her. She didn't fall asleep exactly, but rested and thought very clearly of the things he didn't ask.

#

After Genevieve's funeral Azalea caught a fever. She lay in bed for two days burning up, the mere touch of sheets caused her pain, a rash ran up and down her legs. Her mother stayed home from work and put wet dishcloths in the refrigerator to lay on her forehead. The day her father told her the news, they had watched *The Miracle Worker* at school, and Azalea learned that Helen Keller had gone blind as a baby from scarlet fever. Azalea asked the fever to take her eyesight so that Genevieve would come back. That night the porch light bulb went out and she woke up into the pure country darkness of her bedroom, half-believing that her bargain came true. Genevieve would return. Azalea would know her by her smell, always spicy, the oregano and pepper in a can of soup. When Azalea woke again the next morning, her fever had broken and a cold, dreamless light shone through the window. She went to wash her face in the bathroom and when she looked in the mirror she felt like she was seeing her face for the first time. It wasn't how she remembered her face looking. It seemed foreign to her, this face.

In the weeks after Gen's funeral she couldn't stop herself from planning the funerals of her different family members. Her father would have the entire VA in the pews, a handshaking

procession of men saying that he'd saved their lives. Her mother's ashes would be spread in the Texas Gulf, the place where she saw her mother more relaxed than anywhere else in the world, where she always had the look of a movie star lounging on a yacht. Eli's was the hardest to consider. She would have to fight with her parents to get him what he wanted. A tombstone with a Stars Wars quote on it, an emboss of a hooded Jedi.

Sometimes when she talked to her family they would sound very far away, as if they were already muted by time. Sometimes the moment that she was living was already a memory. Death was a matter of *when*, not *if*. She had been lied to all her life about this, starting when they explained death to her with a refrain that was meant to be assuring. *But not until you're very old.* They had known it wasn't true and had said it anyway. And the talk of Heaven had been very consoling when death claimed pet hamsters or octogenarian great-aunts or the bald starling chicks that fell out of the nests each spring, but now Heaven had lost its allure. Death was a hole they were all bound to fall into, a tear in the seam of the known world. It was irreparable. No one had told her the truth because the truth was too much for adults to witness. No one could face it so she alone must face it.

Eli seemed to sense what was happening. On a visit home from college, he left a CD of Mozart's *Requiem* in her room without explanation. She lay across her bed and listened. After Gen's funeral her parents finally painted her room from light pink to eggshell blue, after years of her requesting it. Since age the six she had understood that pink was a color she was supposed to like because it was a girl color, and being expected to like anything made her resentful. Secretly, she liked pink very much, but she had not developed the agility to like things in spite of their intended meaning. The big choral intro of the *Requiem* began, the part that sounded like black carriages driven by phantom horses. This is what she would like to be played at her funeral,

although it was a tad grandiose. No need to hire the choir or orchestra or the opera singers — they could use the CD and the church speaker system. Should she write this down in a will? Where was her notebook?

There were tiny bumps on the new eggshell blue paint, like pores on skin. Her gaze fixed on one tiny bump and moved out to see all the bumps of plaster in the wall. Suddenly she could no longer stand the music. That isn't what death sounded like at all. Death sounded like Aunt Hilary howling as the pallbearers walked the coffin down the aisle. It sounded like the static reverb of "Wing Beneath My Wings" inside a small church with bright green carpet, the kind you'd find at a mini-golf course. It sounded like two dozen mourners failing to sing "Amazing Grace" with conviction. It sounded like the hollow thud of her cousin's body as Aunt Hilary fell to her knees and flung her arms over the coffin. Was there even a number high enough to count all the people who had been born and died? Genevieve was now an invisible number in that tally. How awful, how awful. Genevieve was gone. All those times they hid in the barn, drew letters on each other's backs, played the chopsticks at the piano, hand-picked earrings for each other's birthdays — Gen took all of it with her. *The dead live on in our hearts*, is what Virgil told Azalea on the drive home from the cemetery. He let her skip school and brought her miso soup from the Japanese restaurant. Today was exactly one month after the funeral. It was Friday. No one was home yet.

Azalea took the Valium in her father's sock drawer and wrote a three-page note. Even though her note was her last one, she could not bring herself to confessing that she had helped Gen run away. Azalea counted twelve pills. Feeling hesitant, she subtracted three. When she woke up she was in a hospital bed sipping charcoal through a straw. Her mother sat beside her weeping and hitting her on the leg.

*How could you, how could you.*

#

There was strip of sky outside the window between the trees and the neighbor's roof. When it began to lighten Azalea sat up in bed. Clive was still asleep, his face turned to the wall. If she saw him again or spoke to him again she would likely change her mind, but for now she felt clear. They had noticed each other, they had seen the thing which the other person could not see alone. She wanted to kiss him goodbye but stopped herself. She didn't want to wake him, now that they had returned to their normal selves.

Clive called her a full day later, on Sunday in the afternoon when Azalea was on the phone with her mother. Gil had never come back to the house on Friday night, and no one knew where he had gone.

## Chapter 14

Five days passed with no word from Gil.

Clive called Azalea for a second time that week, and she let it go to voicemail. He had left town. He alluded that he might be losing his job at the theater, that he would fly her out to his house in Lake Tahoe anytime she felt like it. There were rumors floating in the hallways of The Local Company about some kind of lawsuit with Clive's cousin, the daughter of the great-aunt who had left him the money for the endowment. Azalea could have cared less. Each day she called her father after work, who told her they should pray but expect the worst. A man her uncle's age on a bender probably wouldn't make it out alive.

In the evenings life at the theater went on at its regular pace. Here she could pretend to save a person. Each night she gave the hem of her gown to a crooked old man and off they flew across the London skies to a party where he was a ghost from the future. They watched dancers weave through each other to an old Scottish fiddle reel. At the end of the night the crooked old man was cured of his greed. He bought the largest goose, saved the child, lived each day as Christmas.

#

A week after his disappearance, Gil's sponsor finally heard from him. He had called the night before, slurring his words. He was a terrible person who deserved to die, but wanted to thank his sponsor for all his help, and would he please, call his ex-wife in Spain and ask her to adopt Groucho, his cat who had been living with a neighbor for three months. The next day the cops in Owensboro picked up Gil by a dumpster in a McDonald's parking lot. They took him to

UK Hospital for exposure and alcohol poisoning. He'd probably have nerve damage in his feet for the rest of his life, and his kidney levels didn't look great.

#

Gil was in the hospital for a full week before Azalea went to visit, so she had missed the worst of it, which her mother reported at the end of each day with a matter-of-fact tone. A minor seizure. Uncontrollable shaking. Vomiting. A tremor in his hands. A recurring hallucination that his father was sleeping under the hospital bed. She didn't realize that she was afraid of seeing her uncle until she arrived at the hospital and it was too late to turn around. Her father appeared grim, her mother tired and impatient. They whispered greetings when she entered the room. Gil was sleeping. They went out to the hallway to talk, to tell her of the updates. He been in a bad way when he first arrived, but he'd gotten over the shakes for the most part. They were keeping him for pneumonia and for the exposure blisters on his feet. There was something they weren't telling her, Azalea suspected. They left to the cafeteria to talk about the thing that didn't want her to know. She returned to the room. Gil slept with his mouth open, an IV drip in his arm, a red Jell-O stain on his hospital frock. His feet were in some kind of elaborate pressurized socks for hypothermia. No one could look at him and say this man was a very talented musician who produced a Swedish pop band in the nineties. The problem with sickness was that it took your style, it was fearfully equalizing. He seemed like everyone else now.

Azalea moved the vinyl chair to face the television set instead of the bed, that way wouldn't have to look at her uncle's wrecked body and think about the inevitable sickness and death of everyone she loved. She flipped the channels to a John Wayne movie. When he woke up, she wouldn't know what to say to him. There wasn't time to think of anything meaningful. It occurred to her that her parents were probably talking about cutting him off – tough love, not

being enablers, that kind of thing. This might be the last time she ever saw her uncle. Her palms sweated. She had to say the right thing. She should tell him that she had worn his leather jacket throughout high school, listened to every record he'd left behind in the shed, read the books he hadn't packed and lit up with the discovery of each annotation ("man vs. nature, man vs. self"; "like Buddhism!"). She forced herself to trudge through *The Illiad* in sixth grade, a book she didn't even like but wanted to like, and out of all the things he'd left behind, she had built herself. If she didn't say it now he would never know.

When she turned around Gil's eyes were open, and they seemed to have been open for some time.

She stretched her arms overhead. "Hey, you need anything?"

"I'm good." He reached for a can of Sprite on the table, sipping a straw. "John Wayne," he said.

"Yeah."

Men on horseback killed each other in the sunset tones of Technicolor.

"Not much really of an actor, John Wayne," Gil remarked. "It's like the same role every time."

"He had the range of a carpet square," said Azalea. "But he made a type."

The movie went to a commercial for a local car dealership.

"I sort of thought you were cured," Azalea said. "I shouldn't have left you at the bar."

"You're not my mother," he coughed. "I'm the one who fucked up." He puffed out his cheeks and let out a sigh that turned into a hacking cough. He spat into a Kleenex. "You should know something. You might already. But I've been directly involved in the deaths of several people. Including the sister of that director of yours."

“He already told me about you and her.” Azalea was tired of being treated like a confessional booth. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“I see,” said Gil. There was a long pause. “This is probably not any of my business—”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“—but you need to be careful around him.”

Azalea pulled her cardigan tightly around her.

“He’s not a good person,” Gil continued. “I won’t get into it, but trust me. Stay as far away from him as you can.”

Azalea didn’t say anything.

“You’re not—,” he began. “I mean it’s not business but you’re not—”

Azalea didn’t say anything.

“Shit,” he said.

“Don’t worry.”

“He’s using you,” Gil said. “To get back at me.”

“It’s casual.” She gave her uncle a sharp look. “And any way not everything is about you.”

“I’m sure he’s fascinating.” He adjusted the bed with the control so that he was upright.

“Fuck wads often have a certain appeal.”

“I can’t believe I’m getting a lecture from you,” she laughed. She actually liked that he loved her enough to lecture her.

“I mean if you’re going to have liaisons with your director, then at least be strategic about it. Where can this get you? Make it count. You think I’m joking? I’m dead serious.”

“It’s casual,” Azalea repeated.

“Then it’s easy to leave.” Some color was brought back to his face. “Get out of this horse shit factory. Come back to it only after you’ve really failed. Or really succeeded.”

“I’m here because I like it here.” She slid down in her chair, wondering if this was still true.

“You only like it here because you’re the best here,” Gil said. “Because it’s easy. You need to like, actually try.”

“You sound like a show mom when you’re on pain meds.”

“This is just Advil talking, honey. They don’t give opioids to addicts. Now you go through with this ridiculous plan—”

“Law school is not ridiculous.”

“Like I said, if you go through with this ridiculous plan, you will look back when you’re my age and wondered what became of your life.”

I smiled at him and stood up to stretch and yawn. “I happen to like the law. I happen to be very good at the things lawyers are good at.”

“Dishonesty? A sociopathic drive to win whatever the costs?”

She rolled her eyes. “More like an obsession with fairness. The love of argument.” Like this one, she thought. She stood and stretched her arms over head. On the window sill there was vase of yellow daisies sent by his sponsor. It struck her as reassuring that someone out in the world believed that her uncle could get well, that this was in the realm of possibility. She leaned over to smell the flowers, but daisies didn’t have much of a smell. Maybe she should buy him some overpriced roses from the gift shop.

“Back to my original point,” Gil’s voice was weak, but she could tell that meddling in her life was providing a much-needed sense of purpose. “About that so-called artistic visionary,” his

voice trilled high class, faux British. “*Di-rec-tor*. He’s not what makes you good.” His voice was a thin reed now. “You aren’t good because of him.”

For some reason, in a way that deeply embarrassed her, she needed to hear this from someone. She fidgeted with one of the petals of the daisies, not looking up. “Don’t worry. It’s already over.”

“I’m just shutting my eyes to rest them,” said her uncle. “I’m not asleep.”

When she looked at her uncle he was snoring lightly. It seemed like he would be okay. She’d expected him to be more distraught and fragile, with that trembling unhinged energy she had seen in movies portraying the mentally ill and the addicted. Incoherent madness. Locked in their own minds, that kind of high-strung sadness. She was thinking this when her mother called. They needed to talk, in private.

#

“It’s time to say goodbye,” said her mother. “At this point, it doesn’t make sense to keep continue.”

“You make it sound like we’re putting him down.” Azalea knew this was coming, but it still shocked her. “He’s not a sick dog.”

“Honey, this was not easy decision to make, but we have to. He can’t get better here, with us, and honestly, I don’t know if at this point he can get better at all.” Her father rubbed his face. “He’s got plenty money of his own, anyway.”

“What about the bankruptcy?”

“There is money. Mostly in real estate. He just needs to sell, make it back to rehab.”

“He needs people,” Azalea protested. “He needs his family.” There was unconditional love, to consider, there was the matter of being kin.

“It’s not because I don’t love him,” her father said. “It’s because I do.”

Her mother sounded frustrated. “But we can’t be there for him anymore. Not until he figures it out on his own. We can’t be his enablers.”

“Honestly,” her father said. “I’m just done. I’m done with it.” And he began to cry, and as he cried Azalea could feel the exhaustion rise off of him.

She swallowed. “Alright then.” Not a huge deal anyway, her uncle had barely been back. He hardly counted as family anymore. “I think I’ll just wait here.” She wished there wasn’t that pouty uptick to her voice, she wished it didn’t come out whenever she was around her parents. “If that’s okay with you all.”

“Whatever you want, honey.” Her mother sighed. “This isn’t your burden to carry.”

#

Azalea leaned against the wall while her parents told him. It went quickly. A minute later her parents left the room, shutting the door behind them. Together the three of them made their way to a parking lot. Down the hallway a couple approached. They were around Azalea’s age, and at first she thought they might be a married couple, but as they approached she could see that they were brother and sister, with the same light brown skin and aquiline noses, walking a sibling’s distance from each other. Their faces were blotched from crying. All the bags they carried with them said the long wait was finally over. Now they could go home. As the man and woman passed the wake of recent death rippled behind them.

Linda put her hand on Virgil’s shoulder. “I know that wasn’t easy. We have to give him up to a higher power now.”

Right then her father stopped his tracks, shut his eyes, and let out a deep sigh. “Damnit. My jacket. It’s in the room.”

“Shit,” her mother said under her breath. “The cooler. I forgot it, too.”

“I can get it,” Azalea said. “I don’t mind.”

“You sure?” Her mother frowned.

“I should say goodbye, on my own. This way it’s quick.”

#

He wasn’t doing anything. Not sleeping. Not crying. He sat upright in the bed, staring at the mute TV. He didn’t turn when she came in.

“Hi again, sorry. I just came in for the cooler and the jacket.” The jacket was on the window sill. “I’ll be out of your hair in a minute.” She raced around the room, ducking under the spare furniture in search of the cooler. “I’m so sorry to bother you but they forgot everything.” She opened the slim wardrobe, where his fancy wool coat hung stained and reeking of alcohol and vomit. She shut the door. “This will just take a minute. So sorry.” She stepped into the bathroom. The cooler was in the sink, leaking water. She dumped out the rest of the ice and zipped it up.

“Found it,” she said, returning to the room. His hand was shielding his face as if blocking out a very bright light.

“Zalie.”

“Is that our bag? The one from Target?”

“Zalie.”

She looked inside the bag. It was extra clothes. There was nothing else to take back with her. She held the cooler by the strap in one hand, her father’s jacket folded over her arm. “I’m really very sorry.” She had resisted looking at him and did so now only by accident. Even from a distance she could see that the whites of his eyes were so red that they turned the color of his

irises a shocking, bright blue. He had a look of such misery that he reminded her of a child, and the way a child is unable disguise their pain. She thought of her grandfather's face in the orphanage photo. Except her uncle wasn't a child anymore, and so the purity of his misery disfigured him. It hurt to meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

He bit his lower lip and nodded his head up and down. "I want to have a family again." He exhaled as he spoke, and his voice almost lost in this breath. "I swear to God I'm going to get better for you all."

"I'm sure you will." She hoped her tone was soothing, but it rang with cheerful falseness. She did not want to be a part of his moment of pathos. It was so draining, carrying the meaning, representing what he had thrown away. She was tired of it. He had buried her in all the meaning. And now she was supposed to make him feel better.

Gil extended his hand as if to shake hers. She reached out reflexively. He grasped her hand tightly. She knew from books and movies and plays that he was grasping her hand like this because he was afraid. "I love you," he said.

Even though she knew she didn't love him anymore, her eyes stung with tears. A long time ago she had loved him very much. Was there a difference? "Don't worry," she told him. "Dad just needs a moment." She let his hand go. "Relapses happen. He knows that."

This seemed to bring him back to his self. He visibly swallowed. His lips were very chapped, his skin dry and grizzled with a two-day old beard. "You need to visit Hilary." He then directed her to the wardrobe where his expensive black wool coat, reeking of alcohol and body odor, hung from a hook. Hilary's address was written on a torn envelope on the top pocket. Azalea couldn't read his chicken scratch handwriting. She found a hospital notepad and pen, and

handed him his reading glasses. He wrote down the address. “Hilary’s got the photo of your great-grandmother. The one you’ve been looking for. I think she’ll let you make a copy, if you go. Tell her I’m indisposed.”

## Chapter 15

For many years after Genevieve died, Azalea's mother had persisted in sending Christmas cards to Aunt Hilary as a gesture of diplomacy and, Azalea suspected, to prove that she was a gracious woman who had been brought up with manners. They never received any cards in the mail in return, and at some point, Azalea's mother crossed Aunt Hilary's name off the holiday card list. News came every now and then through mutual childhood friends and high school reunions. Uncle Mike died two years after Genevieve. Hilary remarried and worked as a nurse in a clinic three hours east from Arcadia. Her husband's family property was at the base of a mountain, nearly impossible to find with a GPS, but Gil had noted in his directions that it was the second driveway after you crossed the bridge that ran over the creek.

Azalea's mother never understood why they called them mountains out there. Really, they were more like hills. And Azalea would argue they were most definitely mountains, ancient mountains that had diminished by time, and also it offended people when you called them hills. It was demoralizing. Azalea thought of his as she shut the door to her car. It was a mountain, truly, hovering over Hilary's tidy brick ranch, like some gentle old giant. Through the bare winter trees the family cemetery was visible on the hillside. Azalea wore jeans and hoodie, recalling how her father's side of family never dressed up for anything, and she carried a tin of shortbread that she bought last minute at a Walgreens. Hilary exited the house waving enthusiastically. Azalea stiffened. She'd almost forgotten how much she disliked her aunt—but she should be sympathetic, she corrected herself. She had more information now, and it was a bad habit, disliking the woman. Azalea's contempt for Hilary had been passed down from her

Linda, who could be such a terrible snob. Azalea told herself she didn't have to like her, but she ought to summon her own compassion. The loss had been very great.

If Hilary had spent years ravaged by grief she did not show it. She looked well. Plump and aged in the way it was normal to plump and age, with dyed auburn hair cut short in the post-menopausal pixie. One day Azalea too would have to cut her own hair, but that wouldn't be for years and years and years. When she did have to cut it, she would look something like that, like her aunt. They shared the same jawline, their faces broad and nearly trapezoidal. Really that hair cut was unflattering on their square faces.

“Good Lord! How long has it been, honey?” Hilary delivered an airy hug with three pats on the back. “You’ve sure grown up tall and pretty.” Her aunt looked past her shoulder.

“Where’s your uncle?”

Azalea vaguely explained Gil’s relapse, thinking it better to leave out the more gruesome details. As it happened whenever she was in the presence of someone she disliked, her speech became crisply annunciated, as if she was in on a phone call for a job interview.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear it. Terrible disease, alcoholism. Runs in families. I hope you don’t touch the stuff. Careful with those steps now, that board is loose. I need to ask Robert to fix it.” They walked into the house.

The living room looked so much like the one in old Hammond County house that Azalea felt dizzy. The old house had been bought by the government years ago through by eminent domain, and razed to make a road that no one used. But here the gist of the house was intact. The same blue crocheted blanket was draped on the back of the couch, the same pine wood clock hung on the wall. Genevieve’s upright piano stood in the corner, and upon it were photographs of Gen at various ages. Azalea had come for Helen’s photo, to see it at least and confirm what she

looked like, but it dawned on her that she also hadn't seen a photo of Gen in years. She leaned over and looked at one of Gen on the old tire swing, the one that had hung from the giant maple by the barn. Her father had fought the government to keep the maple, even hiring an arborist from the university to come out so that he could write a letter. Eight-hundred years old, was the estimated age. But that hadn't saved the tree, and it too had been razed for the road that no one used.

Azalea was overcome by the desire to possess the photograph. She barely had any pictures of Gen. She had almost forgotten that pretty wide face with dark brown eyes, the sprinkling of freckles across her nose. Gen smiled like she would live forever. This strange longing to possess it was so sentimental and strange, as if it was an old doll or teddy bear, as if it could give her comfort.

"I made muffins," said Hilary from the kitchen.

Azalea asked questions about Baby Mike and his daughter. Hilary showed her a picture of a smiling one-year-old in a Minnie Mouse costume on the fridge. The baby was cute, nearly bald still, and didn't look like anyone in the family. Her name was Serena.

"That's a pretty name," Azalea said.

Hilary nodded. "Ain't she cute? I've always been fond of names that were a little uncommon. Like your name and Genevieve's. Why name your kid the same thing everyone else is going to be named, right? Encourages them to be their own people, that's what I say."

Azalea felt herself brighten. This almost felt like a compliment.

Hilary went to the oven and retrieved the muffin in with a dish towel. "How's Virgil doing? With the relapse?"

“He says he done with him,” Azalea said flatly as she down sat at the table. She was feeling disloyal to her father.

“Done how?”

“He doesn’t want to see him anymore. Gil’s on his own now.”

Hilary let out a laugh like canned air. “He’s not done with Gil, I can tell you that much. He was more like a son than a brother, and you don’t give up on your child.”

The muffin was the kind Azalea remembered wanting to make from childhood, the type that came in a box and had too much sugar with a can of blueberries in syrup. She took a bite and was back in the Hammond County kitchen. Saturday morning, the summer they built the third bedroom, when there was the constant wail of a chainsaw or drill. “I love these kinds of muffins,” she said.

“I remember you did,” Hilary nodded. “It’s why I made them.”

“Thanks,” Azalea said bashfully. Hilary poured her a glass of milk. Azalea couldn’t remember why she disliked her. Children could be so unfair sometimes. Her aunt had never been anything but nice, and if she had been aloof, it was no wonder. Her aunt seemed better now, cheerful, whereas in Azalea’s memory she had seemed always withdrawn and meek.

Hilary seemed to notice that Azalea was considering her. “Your father and Gil,” she shook her head. “I always felt jealous of them as a kid. They were peas in a pod. After mama died, Gil would wake up and crawl into Virgil’s bed almost every night. Daddy hated it, but Virgil by then was a teenager and bigger than Daddy. And of course, Virgil could see straight and Daddy hardly knew how to spell his own name half the time.” She chuckled. “That’ll give you a fighting advantage over any one.”

Azalea drank the milk. “You mean they went head to head?”

“Head to head? Oh honey, it was a dog fight between them.” She opened a can of Diet Pepsi and it sizzled as she poured it over ice. “One time—well, let me just say, that it only takes one fight for the losing dog to know his place.”

Azalea was careful. “It must have been hard when my dad got sent to Vietnam.”

Her aunt didn’t flinch. “I did my best to take care of Gil, but it wasn’t the same with me. I wasn’t the man of the house, I guess. No one could control him.” She rubbed her eyes underneath her glasses. “He called to apologize to me but I told him, ‘Look honey, I don’t think much of it. We were just kids and doing the best we could do.’ I’ve let it go. I just try to give it up to God, all of it. I wish Virgil would do the same.” She sat down her glass. “And now Gil’s gotten himself into this mess again.” She shook her head. “I don’t think Virgil has it in him to cut him out completely.”

It occurred to Azalea that her father had it in him to cut out Hilary completely, and that Hilary knew this too, and that fact of it made the air in the room feel heavier.

“He sure did spoil you rotten, didn’t he?”

Azalea felt her eyebrows raise. Her father’s doting on her always lingered in the back of the story. Linda felt like Hilary was jealous of Virgil’s attention to his own daughter. Azalea tried to deflect it. “My dad tried to give me everything he didn’t have growing up. I know I’m lucky.”

“I meant Gil spoiled you, he doted on you. And you thought he hung the moon when you were little.” She smiled thinly. “That’s the kind of thing he had with Virgil, too. He thought our big brother was king.”

Azalea took another sip of milk even though there wasn’t hardly any left. “He was like an older brother more than an uncle.”

“That’s why you want him to stay,” Hilary said.

Azalea nodded. “I think he might die if he doesn’t stay.” She didn’t blink, she felt like a stone. She waited for Hilary to contradict her, but her aunt didn’t. “I was thinking, if the three of you got together and made your peace, then maybe—”

“I haven’t talked to your father since Mike died,” Hilary leaned forward. “And that was his decision. Some things,” she paused. “Anyhow. Some things are better left where they are.” Hilary peeled the wrap of her muffin. “What else you want to ask me? It’s been a while. I suspect it’ll be a while yet before we see each other again.”

Hilary’s brow had tensed but Azalea wasn’t sure why. It was probably better not to ask for anything but she couldn’t help herself. Azalea absently drew a mark in the condensation of her empty glass. “I was wondering if you happened to have a picture of my great-grandmother. Helen? I didn’t even know one of her existed until recently. I’d love to see it.”

“I’ve got it somewhere in storage.”

“Oh nice!” Azalea felt relieved.

Hilary did not get up.

“I’d love to see it,” Azalea clarified.

“It’s in our rented storage, about forty minutes away. I can make you a copy sometime and mail it.”

Azalea’s heart sank but she nodded. Some other time then.

“Did Virgil tell you the whole story? It’s really something. That poor woman.” Hilary seemed prepare to tell her the whole tale, but Azalea stopped her. It was probably a bad idea but she wanted to ask Hilary about Genevieve’s face. She hoped she wouldn’t sound crazy since it

happened when she was young and had been impressionable, and history seemed full of little girls who had seen things that hadn't been there. She was careful with her words.

"I don't know this for sure," Azalea said, "but I seem to remember seeing a picture of Helen when I was a little." She laughed nervously and looked down at her hands. "Gen and I – we always used to play this weird game. I'd stare at her face and it would start to..." Azalea swallowed. "It was like she hypnotized me or something. Because I swear, her face would change. And I think, although I'm not sure, I think it would start to look like Helen's."

"Huh."

"Do you know anything about it, Hilary?"

"That would make sense. We all look like our ancestors to some degree."

"This was different." Azalea searched her aunt's face to see how she was taking it. Hilary looked extremely bored, but Azalea pushed a little harder. "She even told me you saw it happen, one time."

Hilary pursed her lips. "Is that right?"

"I know it sounds crazy," Azalea laughed again. "I don't know what it was about. But that's what I remember."

Hilary rubbed her eye again. "You were both very imaginative girls. Genevieve especially. Prodigies are often unusual in other ways. It's funny." Hilary shook her head. "Here I was, thinking you were going to give me an apology but here we are. Talking about make believe."

Azalea was confused. "What do you mean, apology?"

Hilary's lips were a flat line across her face. "She came by to see you when she ran away. That boy she was with told us."

Azalea's whole body filled with heat. She could feel her armpits sweat through both her t-shirt and hoodie. Her stomach rose with an acidly sweet taste.

"He was questioned by the police, of course," Hilary shook her head. "Eighty dollars." Then she leaned forward, and although it seemed impossible, it felt like Hilary had somehow reached across the table. "Have you ever thought about what would have happened had you called me? She'd still be alive. I know you were just a kid, but you were old enough to know better." There was an excited tone in her aunt's voice. She was relishing this moment, as if she'd been waiting for it for a long time.

Azalea's face burned. "She promised she'd come back. And I didn't understand that she was using hard drugs."

Hilary shook her head and crossed her arms. "You always kowtowed to whatever she wanted."

All this time, Hilary had only been pretending to welcome her. The shame Azalea felt was so immense that it almost felt true, but she was older now, less easy to deceive. Her hands balled into fists. "I should have called you. You're right about that."

"That money," Hilary said. "That bought the drugs that killed her. I want you to live the rest of your life, knowing that."

Azalea stood and draped her purse over her shoulder, trembling. She'd never see her aunt again so she took one last look. It was more than age, the pouches beneath the eyes. Azalea bit her lip, and turned to leave and saw the frying pan on the kitchen stove where Hilary had been cooking eggs earlier that morning. There was still yellow yolk on the pan, and it looked like the same pan from Hammond County, a cast iron. Those you could keep forever.

With a suddenness that almost knocked the wind out her, Azalea remembered the day after Mike had thrown Gen on the coffee table. Her aunt had cooked them eggs in the morning. The night before she had been in the bedroom down the hall. No one could have slept through Genevieve's screaming, and yet the next day, Hilary pretended that nothing had happened. She must have known, she must have heard. Everything. An unwanted thought crossed Azalea's mind. Did Uncle Mike go straight from molesting his daughter to fucking his wife? Did it happen on the same day? Azalea felt nauseated. She'd eaten this woman's food. Her aunt was poison. She wanted to spit her out.

"You knew about Uncle Mike," Azalea said bitterly. "You knew all along. And you didn't do anything."

The front door opened and banged shut. "Mom. Y'all still here?"

Hilary took the glass of soda on the table and threw its contents at Azalea. "Get the hell out of my house." She screamed when she said it. Azalea felt herself jump back.

"Mom." Baby Mike stepped into the kitchen. He was a man now, but he had the same turned up nose he'd had since he was a little boy. He glanced at his mother and then to Azalea. Hilary put her head down on the table with a thud and sobbed. He looked exasperated and embarrassed. "I'll walk you out." He tilted his head to the front door.

Azalea followed him out to the driveway. He wore a Carhart jacket, his hair closely trimmed in a jug-head cut. He was almost the size of Virgil. "She—uh," he paused till he reached her car. "She's got difficulty with emotional regulation. Always has been like that, always will be. She's on medication so this is actually a little better. But anyway." He scratched his head.

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t be sorry.” Azalea wiped her face with her sleeve. The soda was drying but at least it was diet, so it wasn’t as sticky.

“I thought Uncle Gilbert was coming with you.”

“He fell off the wagon. Hard.”

“Shit.” Mike leaned on the hood of her car and put a cigarette in his mouth. “So much for reunions, huh?” He had the dry laugh of someone who was used to laughing at terrible things. “I had a feeling I shouldn’t bring Serena. I’m glad I didn’t.”

“She’s real cute. I saw the picture on the fridge.” Azalea fumbled for her keys inside her bag, still shaking. “You ought to bring her down to our house sometime. Dad would like that. He was always so fond of you.”

“I appreciate it.” Mike stretched his arms overhead. “It feels nice to be invited.”

This was a stupid idea, coming out here by herself. She felt very out of place. “I should get going.”

“Did you bring up Genevieve? She gets emotional about Genevieve.”

“It sort of came up on its own.” She stuffed her hands in her pockets. A melting ice cube had landed in the pocket of her hoodie. She tossed it out.

“If you feel like paying your respects, Genevieve is out back.”

“What do you mean, out back?”

“They moved her when they bought this place. It’s my step-dad’s family plot on that hillside.” He pointed to the slope behind the house.

Azalea must have looked confused.

“You probably think that’s real hillbilly but that’s how they like to do it out here. Keep family on family land. Tradition.” Mike turned his head and blew smoke away from Azalea but

the wind picked it up and it blew in her eyes. “I still think it’s strange, but you know. So is death.”

#

Headstones dotted the clearing on the hillside. The oldest graves were to the left, and their stones were half sunken to the earth, nearly unreadable. Genevieve’s was with the newer graves, her stone pink granite embossed with a small angel blowing a trumpet. *Genevieve Heather Young, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1982 – April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1996, Safe in The Arms of Jesus*. There was a small square chamber in the stone, where a person might light a tea candle. This was surprising, and very unlike the casual Protestantism of their family. Instead of a candle there was a miniature Rudolph ornament.

Azalea glimpsed behind the gravestone and saw that garland of fake pine and holly had fallen off. She placed it back on the gravestone and weighed down the garland with a few large rocks. Her aunt must have been the one who tended Gen’s grave, who had thoughtfully arranged the decorations. One day Hilary would die and more of Gen would die with her. Her aunt must have felt the same loss Azalea had but times a thousand, even if she had not known how to love her daughter well. Azalea would have felt less alone had they remembered Genevieve together, if her aunt had been capable of sharing Gen’s memory. And so Azalea felt especially lonely in her grief. Or maybe that was the nature of grief, that you went through it by yourself. She stood in front of the grave, not knowing what to do.

She supposed it was time to go but she wanted to leave something behind. Flowers would have been a nice gesture even though they wouldn’t have lasted an hour in the cold. How strange it was to visit some bones on a hillside as if any spirit still remained there. Genevieve hadn’t believed in God the *he* but God the *it*. Azalea wished that *it* would make itself known right about

now, and remind her that *it* existed in every movement on the planet, down to the roots of the trees and the worms tunneling through the earth, and it was there on the other side of the gray sky, in shining blue sky and also past it, and far into the deep indigo galaxies and spirals of other suns. How soothing it would be to know with the core of her being, if only for a little while, that there was a place where nothing was ever lost, and what seemed to be lost had only gone beyond time. How good it would be to know, if only for this moment. She longed to know it, in the way an aching person longs for pain medicine.

Nothing came. Today she didn't know anything except that a piece of her own self was buried under her feet. A bitter cold seeped through the cotton of her thin hoodie. She stuffed her hands into her jean pockets. In the right one she felt a coin, a penny she'd found on the floor of the dressing room. She placed it in the chamber. "I miss you, girl." She whispered, self-conscious, as if the others could hear. "I wish you weren't dead. I wish you had lived a long time." Then she turned around wiping the corners of her eyes, and went down the hill.

#

Mike stood on a ladder hanging Christmas lights on the gutters of the house. He waved from the ladder, then stepped down and walked toward her car. "Maybe we'll see each other again in another ten years."

"I hope it's before then," she said.

Mike looked into her eyes, and he must have noticed she had been crying.

"I miss Gen too," he said. "It's like she's everywhere around the house—the photos, the piano— but you can't talk about her without my mom, you know, getting unregulated like that."

Azalea bit her lip and nodded. It surprised her, his therapy speak. At the funeral service Baby Mike sat in the front row playing a Game Boy on mute. Azalea been so wrapped up in her

own suffering that she had barely given any thought to what it must have been like for him to lose his sister. “She wasn’t like any I’ve ever known,” Azalea said. “She was special.”

“She was a prodigy.” He had a charming, lopsided grin. “She tried teaching me, you know, but I could barely make out chopsticks.” Azalea could see traces of her father in his smile.

She studied the earth where the gravel met the yellow grass, wondering how to ask him about the thing that had brought her here in the first place. “Did you ever get that feeling that Genevieve could change herself? Or that there was—I don’t know— another person, living inside her?”

There was no flicker of recognition in his eyes. He looked puzzled. “How do you mean?”

“I’m not even sure, to tell the truth.” She rubbed her eyes, tired. She would need to stop for coffee. “Sometimes,” she almost continued, but stopped herself. Mike didn’t seem to be the type who would be upset or think her crazy, but the confrontation with Hilary had shaken her and she felt overcome by both shyness and fatigue. “I should go before it gets dark.”

Mike gave her another hug. It reminded her of hugging her father. They had the same thick build, as if they were supported inside by the core of a deeply rooted tree. They never were the first to let go, they hugged you and then they waited.

She watched him wave goodbye from her rearview mirror and just from the way he stood—with one hand in his pocket, with that slight hunch as he turned to lope away—time seemed to collapse on itself. He was both ten years old and twenty-one years old. He had always stood that way. He had followed them all summer, always with a red popsicle stain around his mouth, always asking if he could play. Sometimes they would let him. Other times they’d throw clumps of dirt at him from the barn floor and yell at him to leave. His pants always fell down his flat butt. He always picked his scabs till they bled. When clumps of sleep collected at the corners

of his eyes, Gen would take a damp rag and wipe it out, or slap his hand when he scratched a mosquito bite. As she drove back home she tried to let herself be soothed by the curving mountain roads. Winding through them was hypnotic in the same way watching a fire was, and this often gave her a sense of expansion, but an unsettled feeling persisted

The miraculous, she was beginning to think, was a disappointment. It did not crack her open, it did not dissolve her into some great fabric of being, or even reveal anything particularly important other than itself. Only it continued relentlessly to stir her. Every time she tried to approach it, to ask what it was – which she thought was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask – she felt something like despair. A sorrow so immense she could not see its beginning or end. Had she been a different person, the faithful kind, maybe she wouldn't have felt this sorrow. Or maybe she would allow the sorrow break her open, and there would be another wiser person living inside her, and she could ask this other person what it had all meant that her cousin's face changed into another's, into Helen's. The miraculous hadn't been enough to save Genevieve. No message delivered, no warning, no wish, no path made visible that had been invisible. She hadn't felt like she understood anything.

#

The moment that she pulled into the interstate her phone began to chime with voice mails. She pulled over to a gas station to buy a coffee and to fill up. In the bathroom she wiped her face clean with a damp paper towel. The hair around her ears was sticky from the soda Hilary had thrown at her. The single-stall was filthy – a dirty toilet, a sticky floor, a soapy residue on the mirror. She opened the door handle with a paper towel.

You weren't supposed to drink caffeine after three pm, but today she would allow herself an exception. Outside by the trashcan and stack of firewood for sale, she took off the plastic lid

to let it cool for a moment. The coffee tasted burnt but its warmth settled her. She placed the lid back on the Styrofoam cup. This is how people went on without knowing. Filling their life with simple things. Warmth, sweet and bitter tastes, small completable tasks, like filling up a car, like driving back home to a job you enjoyed and were pretty good at even though the pay was bad. She supposed also, that this is how wonder died inside a person as they grew older. One day it was possible she would no longer stir with anything but arrive at dullness that resembled peace. She tried not to think so hard. The gas pump let out its heavy fumes and she stood away from the tank while it filled, breathing a pocket of fresh air. The number of voicemails was troubling. Some kind of crisis must be in action. She prepared herself for bad news.

Julia's voice was smooth but rang with a note of anxiety that Azalea had never heard before. She as calling to let her know that there was a meeting tonight before the show, an important one, about the situation. She hoped Azalea could make it. The second one was from Emily, who sounded like she'd crying, and asked Azalea her to call her about the fucked-up situation without bothering to explain the fucked-up situation. The last message was again from Julia again. This time her voice had recovered its usual velvet softness. She began with *Azalea, I'm not sure how much you have heard about the situation...* and then informed her that the show had been canceled for tonight, and the meeting would still be at six pm at the theater.



## Chapter 16

It was very possible that someone had died. Small groups of people had gathered among the aisles of chairs, clustering near the orchestra pit. They talked low, their faces stricken. Reba raised the base of her hand to her forehead and then dragged it slowly down her face. Azalea's eyes scanned the theater to see who was missing. Reginald, the oldest and therefore the most likely to be dead, was talking to Joanne near the exit doors. Which was a relief. There were also a few people she didn't know. They looked both formal and ruffled, like they had just gotten out of work. She guessed they were Board members. A man in a gray suit she recognized from the courthouse, who she always saw carrying an expensive-looking briefcase. He carried the same one now as he spoke with Julia and Reginald. Azalea moved towards Reba and the other young actors, but Emily grabbed Azalea's hand and threw her arms around her, the smell of powdery deodorant enclosing them both.

"I've been trying to reach you." Emily's eyes were huge and owlish.

"What's happened?"

"It's about Clive."

Azalea realized he was the only one who wasn't there. She brought her fingers to her throat. "Is he alright?"

Emily looked into Azalea's eyes and let out a howl of laughter. Then she explained the situation.

#

A lawsuit between The Local Company and Clive's second-cousin had ground all productions to a halt. For some time, the daughter of Clive's great-aunt had contested the will,

particularly the part where her mother left the two-million-dollar endowment to The Local Company Foundation. She now had substantial evidence that Clive had coerced her mother into rewriting the will when she was not of mentally sound mind. Until the dispute could be resolved, any productions using endowment money would be cancelled and the summer remodeling plans on the theater would be suspended. The offices and rehearsal spaces they had been renting next door would be vacated. Reginald and Julia were back to working in the prop room and in the basement.

Given the last few weeks of Azalea's life, it was hard for any of this information impact her in a significant way. She looked around, numbly seeking cues to know how she ought to be feeling. Reba had her feet propped against the chair in front of her and was pressing so hard into it looked as if it could break. Emily seemed dumbfounded. Gabe's hand had not left the lower half of his face.

The man with the expensive messenger bag was the company's attorney. He said a few words. Wills were notoriously difficult to contest. They were working on appealing the judge's decision. He didn't think the fraud suit had much of a case. The process, however, could be long and drawn out. Years. Reginald and Joanne also spoke. Clive had been dismissed from The Local Company, not only for this lawsuit, but for his behavior towards staff and actors and the crew, especially, the female actors and staff. And although Joanne did not look at her or Emily directly, Azalea couldn't help but feel that this last bit was directed to them. Emily shrunk into her chair. Azalea did not. Azalea refused to move.

They had learned a lot, Joanne said. Indeed, this was really an opportunity in disguise as a setback. They had survived nearly thirty years without an endowment at all. And while the theater could use a bit of a facelift and also an exterminator, for the mice, they were in otherwise,

very good shape. They had repaired the roof the last summer. They had already purchased a brand-new sound and lighting board and updated the stage with a deus-ex-machina and a trap door. There were plenty of grants to apply to – the NEA was coming up. When Gabe asked if there was a grant that could replace a two-million-dollar endowment, they demurred. It was a delicate situation. It was going to take some time.

Emily raised her hand. “How long?”

They weren’t sure. But part of the endowment’s conditions had been that Clive would direct two plays a year.

Megan, the makeup artist and costume designer, raised her hand. She sat by her husband, Leif. Ostara and Leif Jr. were in the back, quietly doing their homework. “Will our contracts be renewed for 2008?”

“Frankly, there are a lot of unknowns at work,” Joanne said.

“Let’s talk after the meeting,” Reginald nodded.

Leif spoke, the timbre of his soft voice barely carrying past a row of chair.

Reginald cupped his ear. “Come again?”

“Where’s Clive now?” Leif said.

“Damned if I know,” Joanne shrugged. She was looser than Azalea had ever seen her. She had the lanky posture of someone who had thrown back a couple of shots and Xanax.

Emily leaned towards Azalea. “They went by his house for a meeting yesterday but it was completely empty. A neighbor said he’d seen a moving truck two days before.”

Azalea recalled the several cardboard boxes she’d seen in the hallway. Maybe he hadn’t been unpacking from his last move. Maybe he’d been packing to leave town, knowing this was already in motion. A nauseating but giddy feeling took hold of her. She shielded her mouth,

stifling a laugh. Of course he was a crook. She knew it. She had known all along and pretended not to, the desire to believe in him had been powerful. How had they not seen this coming?

Money, she answered herself. And then that way of his. His certainty.

Joanne acknowledged the strong feelings everyone was probably having in this moment. It had been a deep betrayal of trust.

But it's not over, Reginald assured them. This was a simply a bump in the road, the life of a nonprofit theater. It had its ups and downs. They would scale back. They would persevere. Also, the cast of *The Christmas Carol* would have to pick up their last paycheck on their way out, since The Local Company could no longer afford a direct deposit service.

#

"He's too pretty to go to prison." Gabe scooted into a semi-circular booth with art deco sconces. They'd gone to the lesbian bar and found the corner table by an over-sized, yonic flower that hung on the wall. They fished for IDs when the server came over.

"He won't last a week," Gabe continued.

"That tight little butt," Emily said.

Reba snorted. "Rich people don't go to real prison."

Across from the booth was a wall length mirror. They were slightly unkempt, the four of them. Azalea was still wearing the hoodie she'd worn on the car ride. She smelled like coffee and ranch chips. Leia's was classy, the owner was often seen wearing a tailored white pantsuit no matter the season.

They had believed him almost completely, all of them, and were now searching for proof that he had been a fraud from the beginning, that they had known the whole time – the whole time! – something was amiss. Clive disappeared into the bathrooms at every party and would

emerge thumbing his nostrils, his speech accelerated. He once asked Dmitri where he could score some coke. (Dmitri, love his heart, directed his church's passion play and played bass in a moderately well-known Christian rock band. He didn't even drink beer.) They were no longer so sure about the performance art stuff. The treading water off the Greek Islands, the sleep deprivation in a coffin. This had all be filmed and shown where, exactly? Where was the footage? His website was essentially a Tumblr. It seemed that someone with his money could have hired a professional.

As they talked Azalea realized that Gabe and Reba had never left Kentucky but had moved straight to Arcadia after graduating from college, eager for good roles and to build a scene. They were a couple of years younger than her. Reba's round heart shaped face was framed by a short bob, and the smattering of acne on her forehead made her look like a teenager still. She poked her thumbs through the holes in her sweater as she drank a neat Bourbon. "I turned down DePaul this year," she said. "For this."

They moaned in sympathy.

"Deferred or turned down?" Azalea asked.

"Turned down."

Emily winced. Azalea assured Reba that she could audition next year and do just as well.

"He really fucked us." Gabe turned his eyes up toward the ceiling and blinked back tears. "All that shit about *New York doesn't exist*. You know, people actually go to the theater in New York. That exists."

No one could say the worst thing. They had believed him, even Azalea, who had resisted the longest. Over their heads was a cloud of hurt feelings, of feeling young and feeling a little silly. Their ire turned toward their surroundings. This was so very typical of Arcadia, a place that

was neither a town or a city, full of cheap Victorian rentals and old tobacco warehouses and a flagship university that drew the best and brightest from Paducah and Harlan. But it wasn't enough that they had not one but two locally owned coffee shops, and that compared with the rest of the state, they were wealthy, with a vibrant international community of emigres and small business owners. Arcadia was forever on the brink of cool, forever emerging. Why?

"It's the goddamn horses," Emily sighed.

This was the problem. The wealthy crowd were essentially, rednecks with money. The only other industries were tobacco, whisky, and coal. No industry had ever thrived in Kentucky that was also not some sort of vice. It corrupted the culture. It had made the people churchy and dull, especially the bluebloods, who they needed, begrudgingly, to support their artistic endeavors.

This was a conversation that Azalea had at least once a month with herself. No one with ambition ever seemed to live in Arcadia without also desiring to live elsewhere. No one wanted to be here, until Clive came along. They had flocked. He had used his energy and money to plant himself here, to change it, because he saw the potential. It was the singular thing that had led her to believe in him, despite his meanness. He believed in them, and in this place.

"But he was right about some things," Azalea said quietly.

They stared at her.

A moment in her life was passing, or perhaps already passed. She could feel it dying away. "The theater isn't a real place. It's a moment in time." She raised her glass and took a drink. "Fuck New York."

"What's this? I thought you hated him," Gabe said.

"Of all the people!" Emily laughed and tssked. "You don't even really like acting."

“I love it.” Azalea retreated back into the deep booth. “But I hate being poor.”

“Reginald and Joanne are not poor.” Reba shook her head, and then seemed to reconsider this statement. “I mean, they’re not rich either.”

Emily was silent. Her grandfather owned a successful chain of local department stores.

“I grew up poorish.” Gabe frowned. “And I plan on being solidly upper-middle class someday, thank you very much.”

“I don’t care much either way. My needs are simple.” Reba took her straw and wrapped it tightly around her index finger.

Such were the protests of people who had never been poor, who could buy the things they needed, if not the things they wanted. Azalea had listened so attentively to her father’s stories of poverty that she almost felt like she had lived through it herself. Her grandmother had died of an infected tooth which had led to sepsis. A single tooth.

Her friends were vaguely upset with her, she could tell. Azalea stretched her arms in front of her. “You have to be called to acting. I’m just not. I’m not saying I won’t miss it – especially the people. You guys.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Oh please, you hardly ever see us. And when you do you’re always leaving early.

“Because I have to be at work at eight in the morning!” Azalea laughed. Actually, she noted, now would be a good time to leave.

“Oh my god, are you seriously looking at the time right now?” Gabe raised his voice. “After all that’s happened?”

“It’s a Saturday!” Reba lunged halfway across the table, attempting to procure the phone. “It’s eight thirty!” They were having fun, ganging up, getting loud.

“I’m not twenty-two anymore. I need nine hours of sleep, minimum.” Azalea wiped away tears from her laughter. “Otherwise I get these dark circles.”

“Concealer!” Reba cried. “Just use concealer!”

They all laughed except for Emily, who bit an olive off a plastic sword and spoke with the olive rolling around the side of her cheek. “You know, Clive said you were the kind of actor who could seduce the audience because you didn’t care.” She swallowed. “That’s your strength. Your…” Emily paused and shimmied of her shoulders. “Your indifference.”

Azalea wasn’t sure how to take this. “He never told me that.”

“He always gave the best compliments to people when they weren’t around to hear them,” Gabe said. Reba’s timing never failed her. Emily could vamp her way through anything. Gabe not only had a fine singing voice, but an expressive one, and a sharp physical instinct.

“It sort of makes the compliment better, doesn’t it? Hearing it second-hand,” Reba observed. “Like we’ve been eavesdropping on his mind.”

“I’m not sure that ‘indifference’ is much of a compliment,” Azalea said.

“That’s not what he said, exactly,” Gabe said. “I was there. He said you had ‘nonchalance.’ Which set you free. He called you a seducer.” He raised his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

Azalea was secretly pleased but continued to insist that she wasn’t. She wasn’t free, she wasn’t nonchalant, and she certainly wasn’t a seducer. The server came and placed their second round of drinks. Clive was full of shit. That’s how he’d swindled them.

“Y’all.” Emily spread her hands on the table and pressed them down. “You can’t tell anyone. But well, now that the show is over – definitely, definitely don’t tell the olds. Ever.”

“Ah, the olds.” Reba croaked in a geriatric way.

“What I’m about to tell you – about Clive. I’d never mention it if it wasn’t totally over. Like, over over.” Her face was turning bright red.

Gabe covered his mouth and then uncovered it. “Emily! No!”

Emily raised her hands. “I haven’t even said anything yet!”

“But Emily!” Gabe smacked Emily on the arm.

Reba’s eyes grew wide. “What? What is it?”

“You slut,” Gabe said. “And you know that I mean that in a purely empowering sex-positive kind of way. But Emily!” He covered his mouth again. “*Him?*”

Azalea felt like she might be sick. She’d been laughing too loudly.

Reba suddenly burst out with recognition. “Holy shit! Oh my god, when? The party? Oh.” She made a face. “I mean, don’t get me wrong. I drank the Kool-aid too but Clive is so –” She made another face. “So –”

“Hot? Gabe suggested.

“Sometimes I don’t think I’m bisexual at all,” Reba said. “Like I really must be more into women? Because I just don’t see his sex appeal. I mean his breath.” She blew through her lips.

“You secretly want to,” Gabe teased. “You totally would .”

“Never,” Reba insisted.

Gabe looked at Azalea. “I’d consider it.”

“I mean, he is hot,” Azalea admitted, thinking that this admission would be the best way to feign innocence. “He’s got the pot-belly but you know he’s got some biceps on him too.”

“For how long?” Gabe asked Emily.

“Since before auditions.” Emily looked down and smiled, brushing her hair back behind her ear. “Technically, he wasn’t the director yet.”

Reba wrinkled her nose. “He’s just so old. Like dad old.”

“More like teenage dad.” Azalea came in to the rescue. The conversation was edging into shaming. “Sixteen years difference is still within the French formula.”

“Fifteen years.” Emily sipped her wine. “I’m a year older than you.”

“What if you had gotten caught thought?” Reba asked. “Wouldn’t he have been fired? Or you fired? There was a clause in the contract. Wasn’t there?”

“I didn’t know you were so conservative.” Azalea sent a glare to Reba, who flushed.

“We stopped when I was in *Nonesuch*. And then, well.” Emily’s face fell. She looked as if she might cry.

Oh, Azalea thought. Emily had believed in him more than anyone else in the world.

Emily regained her composure. “Then after *Nonesuch*, we started again.”

“No one really cares,” Gabe reassured her. “The olds were all sleeping with each other back in the day. Joanne and Reginald.” He scissored his fingers.

“But Reginald is such a homosexual,” Azalea laughed, to lighten the tone.

“Any gay over forty has tried a slice of fur pie,” Reba said. “You had to try it at least once back then, to be sure.”

Emily looked at Azalea from the other end of the table. She no longer looked as if she might cry. She knew. Azalea’s heart pumped. If she confessed now, it would relieve some of Emily’s shame. Azalea did not feel ashamed at all. If she confessed one truth would create another lie, which was that she had not enjoyed her night with Clive. It was fine to sleep with anyone you wanted to sleep with as long as you didn’t like it. The truth was Clive had interested her. She did not enjoy Clive in a way that was wholesome or good, and that was the only way you were supposed to enjoy sex. But now Emily was waiting for Azalea to make her confession.

If she didn't, Emily would tell Gabe, and Gabe would tell everyone. And then what. Reba would certainly resent her for it. But why did other people's opinions matter anyway?

Azalea pressed her feet into the pole at the center of the table. Next year she'd be hundreds of miles from Arcadia. She would never come back aside from the holidays. You were supposed to be truthful. This is what she was expected to do. She was expected to have solidarity. There wasn't much choice in the matter. Emily was waiting. Azalea suddenly wanted to scream and tell her to fuck off. Instead covered her face with her hands and commanded herself to take on a different expression. When she removed her hands, she wore a smile of delighted embarrassment, a kid caught in a prank.

"I hooked up with him once." Azalea stirred her gin and tonic. "After the fall show was over."

Shrieks of laughter erupted from all around the table.

"But you hate him." Reba's brow furrowed in confusion, and lowered her voice in an unnerving way. "You said you hated him."

"That's not untrue." Azalea shrugged.

Emily appeared bitterly satisfied. "I had a feeling. You two – there was chemistry." She smiled thinly. The poor girl probably loved him. Maybe now Emily could tell herself she never had. If Azalea had known that he'd been still sleeping with Emily, she never would have gone to his house. She had assumed it was over between them. For the first time, Azalea felt contaminated, like there was a thin layer of dust coating her.

Just then, like an act of mercy, Azalea's phone rang. She didn't recognize the area code, it was probably a wrong number, but she frowned like it was a serious matter and told everyone she needed to take the call. She pulled on her coat and exhaled into freezing air.

“Hey, it’s Mike.”

“Mike?” Her brain tried to remember a Mike. “Oh, Baby Mike! Hi.”

He chuckled. “No one has called me that in years.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve – anyway. It’s been a day.”

“I think I know what you were talking about. When you were talking about Gen.” Mike was quiet a moment. “How she was like two people.”

Azalea stopped walking. She’d bolted across Main Street and now stood in the courthouse square. “You saw her.” She stood under a lamp post with a bell of lights hanging from it.

“A few times,” he said. “She would do it to scare me. It was kind of like the Incredible Hulk or something.” He breathed into the receiver. “And then it started happening, you know. Whenever our dad would start something.”

“I saw it too.” Azalea circled the lamp post. “I thought I made it up.”

“Our dad thought she was possessed,” Mike said. “He wanted to take Helen’s picture and burn it but Mom hid it till after he died. Right now it’s hanging up in the hallway. You would have passed it had you gone to the bathroom.”

“She told me it was in storage.”

“She’s a real asshole half the time. Maybe three quarters of the time. Anyway, what’s your email address? I can send you a photo of it.”

“It’s Azalea underscore –”

“This pen ran out. Hold on a moment.”

Azalea’s teeth chattered. She buttoned up her coat. Her fingers ached from the cold so she held them in front of her mouth to warm them. Steam rolled out of her throat. She paced up

and down the sidewalk to keep warm. People always grew thirsty for light around this time of year. Glowing white beads wove around lamp posts, and the black asphalt road reflected a slick yellow glare. Even though she didn't understand much and probably never would, it was enormous to be alive.

"Sorry," Mike returned. "We hid all the pens from Serena. She's been writing on the walls." He repeated back her email address.

Azalea almost started shaking when it came time to hang up. For some reason she felt afraid.

"Are you sure it's her face?" she asked. "Our great-grandmother's?"

"I mean, it certainly resembles her," he said. "I believe what I saw."

"I believe it too," Azalea said. "I just don't know what to make of it."

"Well," Mike said. A toddler screamed in the background. "There are more things on Heaven and Earth."

"What's that?"

"I was Hamlet in high school."

"I didn't know you acted!" She was pleased.

"There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio that are dreamt of in your philosophy." He cleared his throat. "So I guess that's what I make of it. I'll send the picture to you right now."

#

Azalea had not bothered taking her shoes off at the door, or her coat, and now she stood in her bedroom, staring at the screen, growing too warm in all her layers. The image was taking

forever to load. Then at last it appeared, the pixels sliding down. First the hat, then the forehead, then the eyes, then the nose and mouth, then the neck. It was the exact same face, the one she had seen all those times, the one who had pressed through Gen's with such determination that she had changed her.

Helen could have been described as beautiful or ugly. Either would have been accurate. Her large cheeks that were round as halved-apples, a mouth that followed the same curve as a tiger's, and eyebrows that darted into a v. Her hair was cut short in a waved bob, the angle of her face slightly tilted for the camera. No one would have called her pretty. She was too much for pretty, even though she wore a delicate hat pinned on top of her head with a small rhinestone brooch and a feather plume. Something about her, it was hard to pinpoint what, was impossible to look away from. Her eyes radiated hypnotic power, like Gen's eyes. She believed in herself.

No wonder why they killed her. They must have hated her, otherwise they would have just shot her in the head, quickly, like you would to a man. Here in this photo she hadn't known what her end would be, or what her son's life would be, or how the generations would suffer, how they would need her.

Azalea sat down in the chair, zooming in, zooming out. She hit print even though the quality of her printer was poor, and the image came out wet with ink and light gray bands. She left it out to dry on the desk, and then she went to take a shower. Unwillingly, her mind pictured the men putting Helen into a sack and throwing her over the bridge. A knot between her ribs tightened. Azalea hoped she had died beforehand, she hoped it had been quick, that they had killed her like an equal. But it hadn't been quick. They hadn't been merciful. Maybe they hadn't even hated her, but she had just been a thing, a life size doll they could destroy. The world remembered more about Helen's death than her life, and it was so unfair. It wasn't the most

important thing, really, it wasn't why she had come to them. Azalea turned her face into the stream of water and imagined it washing the violent images out of her body. She stayed until the water began to grow cold.

She stepped out the shower, dried herself off with a towel and wrapped it around the top of her chest. It was not as momentous as she had thought it would be, seeing Helen's photo, but in her, very quietly, she was being reorganized. Whatever this was, it was taking a priority, placing itself closer to her center. She brushed her teeth, spat, rinsed. She wiped away the condensation in the mirror and looked. Her jaw came from Helen, wide and angular. The freckles on the bridge of her nose she shared with Gen. No mystery lived behind her own face, no other person slept in her throat.

Regardless, she turned off the light so that the bathroom almost completely dark. As a girl this is what they had done as slumber parties – lock themselves in the bathroom and summon the ghosts in the mirror. There was enough light that came in the underneath the door, the right amount to see what wasn't there.

Now she stood in front of the dark mirror and looked deeply into it. Even as an adult, it never failed to scare her, she wanted to crouch down low at the feel of the darkness staring back. Her eyes detected movement, a shape emerging that was not only her.

She held the towel, which was slipping down. It was not just her. There was another. She waited, and she waited, until she crossed over the fear. There was another. A pervading love embraced her, it opened a door to her chest. Tears streamed down her cheeks and neck. And she shifted toward that loving darkness. That was all. That was all Helen had ever wanted to tell them.

## Chapter 17

Azalea stepped over the bones of a mouse as she walked in the barn, probably left over by the family of owls who nested in the rafters. Her mother told her that ever since had Gil relapsed, Virgil was spending all his free time in the barn, woodworking. In the last three weeks he made a new rocking chair for the porch, and now he was determined to build Azalea a table for Christmas even though she was moving out-of-state in a few months. Azalea didn't want or need a table, but her father believed the one she had now was too wobbly, which was true. One of the legs was supported by a folded-up index card.

She called to her father over the wail of the saw, let him have a moment to cover-up the table and act like it wasn't for her. The printed image of Helen was tucked into a manila folder inside her bag. She drifted slowly to the stall where he kept most of his carpentry equipment. He was hanging up the circular saw, claiming he was only making an extra chair for the table in their kitchen so that Eli's fiancé wouldn't have to sit in one of the uncomfortable metal folding chairs.

Azalea hovered by the space heater to stay warm. It was too hard, she thought, telling him. Just thinking about it made her ache with something like eagerness and embarrassment. But if there was anyone who would believe her it was her father, a person of a deep and ambiguous faith. He recorded History Channel specials about Atlantis and the Shroud of Turin, kept a tiny stone Buddha that a monk had given him while he was in Vietnam, collected usedbooks by Edgar Cayce and herbal remedies. He was a maker of small miracles. When she was little, she

burnt her hand on a skillet and he took out the burn by reciting a verse from Ezekiel. It had nothing to do with himself, he had told her. He wasn't the one who healed.

His eyes peered up at her above his bifocals. He should be wearing safety goggles but never did. "I know you're torn up about Gil leaving," he began.

Azalea shrugged, hoping to appear resigned, because it the best way to get him to do something he didn't want to do. "I'm not here to change your mind about it, but he begged me to ask you to let him stay. He says he wants to get better."

"I don't doubt it." Her father turned to rearrange some blades onto the wall pegs. "And I hope and pray he does."

Azalea chose her next words carefully. "I don't think we'll ever see him again, if he leaves."

Her father leaned against the work table and crossed her arms. "I thought having us close-by would help him recover. But I was wrong. I think it only made things worse."

"You weren't wrong. You just have to keep believing in him. I know you think I don't know anything —"

"That's not —"

"But he's not like most people." She reached in her bag and pulled out the manila folder.

"He already sent me a letter."

"It's not a letter." Azalea handed over the folder. He opened it and stared at Helen's picture.

"I'll be." He sucked through his teeth. "Hilary sent this to you?"

"Mike Junior did." She heard her voice flutter. "This is going to sound very strange, what I'm about to tell you."

Her father observed her with patience. He often looked at her this way, as if there existed a deep well inside him that never rippled.

“I used to see her. She used to come through Gen’s face. I thought for a long time, that I had just made it up, or maybe I had been hypnotized.” Azalea’s knees shook. She sat down on a bench. “Did you ever see her?”

Her father carefully placed the photo back in the folder and placed it on the work table. Even though there was no one around he stood up and slid the door to the stall shut. He returned back to the worktable and leaned against it, gripping the sides with his hands.

“When we were kids,” he began. Then he crossed his arms in a different direction and took a deep breath. “Sometimes, when it would get really bad, on a few occasions.”

He took off his glasses and rubbed his face. “On a few occasions, I thought he might kill us. I haven’t thought about this in years.” He let his head drop. “Mmph. One night he knocked Mama out cold.” His hand floated up to the base of his neck, as if he didn’t notice. “He put a knife to my throat. Gil jumped on him. He couldn’t have been more than six years old. Skinny, light kid. Daddy threw him off, knocked him real hard against the wall. That’s when I first saw Helen, coming through Gil in some way. None of us knew what was going on. I think Daddy thought he’d lost his mind. The face of his own mother,” he pointed at the floor. “Right there, in the face of his son. They were both shaking. And it was like Daddy woke up for a second, out of that blind rage. He ran straight out of the house and didn’t come back for a week.” He nodded.

“But it didn’t stop him for good.”

“No. I feel like I need to sit down.” He pulled up a broken wicker chair and brush off the sawdust from the seat. “But she probably saved my life that night. And she saved my father.”

Azalea shifted. “What do you mean, she saved your father?”

“He didn’t want to kill me. Not really.”

Her father looked at her but she couldn’t stand to look in his eyes directly. He had kept the truth from her, he had bent and shaded his children from what he had lived through. “She saved him from murdering his own son.”

“He was a monster,” Azalea said. “Gil was right.”

“Nah.” Virgil leaned back and the chair groaned beneath him, threatening to break. “He was a human being.”

Azalea felt a grimace on her face.

“You’ve got to understand, he was about five years old when they killed his mother. He hid in the closet and didn’t come out till a neighbor stopped by. He was never sure how long he stayed in there. He didn’t really have a memory of his childhood before then.” Virgil took a deep breath. “He did terrible things. But when you think about where he came from—he was abused in every way possible in that orphanage.” Her father was quiet a moment. “I know it’s hard to understand but we loved him. Sometimes he took us fishing, showed us how to make paper hats, normal stuff. It was Jekyll and Hyde when he got drunk.”

A thought roiled through her guts like a sickness. “But what he did to Hilary,” she said. “What he did to all of you.”

“I know.” Tears rolled down her father’s cheeks. His beard was growing back, so that he looked both like his old self and like someone she’d never met before. “When I left I didn’t really speak to him again until he was dying of cancer. He told me everything that had happened to him as a child. I could scarcely stand to hear what had been done to him and I’ve heard everything in the book. He begged forgiveness. I couldn’t help but give it to him at that point.”

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I didn't want you to have to know any of this. It's a burden I don't want you or anyone else to carry

"I can carry it, Dad. I really can." Her voice sounded thick. "Maybe you can forgive him but I won't. Not ever."

"That's why I never wanted you to know," he said. "If I hadn't forgiven him I would have been his prisoner the rest of my life." He blew his nose into a shop rag then picked up the folder with Helen's picture, and opened it. "Goddamn it I got tears on the photograph."

"I can print another." She went to his side, pulling up another chair. They observed the photograph together. The bold eyes, the delicate, fine hat. The hat of a poor woman with money.

"I think she resembles you the most," Virgil said.

"Really? I can see more of Gen. That look. Not the eyes but around them." Azalea put her hand on her father's arm. He patted it. "What do you think she is?"

"For a long time I thought we dreamed her up. A collective hallucination. Those happen sometimes, during intense trauma." He crossed his ankle at the knee. "And then I thought she was a ghost. But I suspect it has more to do with love than with ghosts. I don't know. Maybe love acts like a ghost, when it's that strong. It should probably move on but instead it just lingers." He let out a weak laugh.

Azalea sensed this was the moment to press him. "If you can find it in you to forgive your father, then why can't you forgive Gil?"

Virgil blew through his lips and gave her a smile. "You don't know when to quit."

"But why can't you?"

"I do forgive him, but that's not the same as letting him back in. He uses people."

“All of this,” she gestured to the photograph. “It means something. She gave him something. I think it was to protect him.”

“Genevieve had it too,” Virgil said. “But it didn’t protect her, did it? Or maybe,” he considered, “it protected her. But it didn’t save her from herself. Not in the long run.”

This gave Azalea a chill. “I guess not.”

“I’m willing to concede that he’s special, but he’s also just regular addict. Getting away from us might be the only way he can get clean.”

“Some kind of miracle could happen. If it happened once.” Azalea bit her lip. “He says he loves us.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Virgil’s brow was furrowed, as deep in thought. “If miracles occurred all the time, and maybe they do, we’d just have to keep going on with regular life. Wouldn’t we? Death and taxes. All of it.”

Azalea shook her head and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. Miracles were supposed to be made of thin linen veils and blinding white lights, but their miracle was made from blood and darkness. It bewildered her as much as it inspired wonder. She had thought it would solve everything.

Virgil pulled Azalea toward him and hugged her. His love was plain and fierce and didn’t care what she thought. He let her go. They stood up, dusting off their jeans. A few minutes in the workshop always left you with a coating of sawdust. As they walked back to the house for dinner, they talked of the ordinary. They needed new gutters – don’t ever buy an old house or unless you want to spend your whole life fixing it up. Azalea nodded. She was tired of trying to be as good as her father was. Maybe she didn’t want to be good anymore. She wanted to be free, from what she couldn’t say and no one could tell her.

## Chapter 18

Gil left for rehab the day before Christmas Eve. Virgil picked him up from the halfway house where he'd been staying.

Gil had grown thinner and his clothes hung loose from his body, and although it was cloudy outside he wore dark sunglasses. They drove in silence until they neared the airport. Virgil hadn't been able to sleep well since Azalea came to him with Helen's picture. Despite his efforts to not over think it, he found himself thinking about Helen's face constantly, as he had when he was a young man and she had first appeared. What was it exactly, what it was called, he wondered. He had even gone to the library and looked up books about ghosts, but he could not find any books about ghosts who haunted people from inside the body. Ghosts haunted places. So then he looked up books on angels, but he could not find any books about angels who appeared through a person's face. Angels were beings of light and air, they spoke of divine portents and blessings, while Helen did not even leave them a cryptic message. The question continued to distract him when he saw his patients, men and women his daughter's age, back from tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. They told them about their flashbacks and marriage problems, how they'd have panic attacks when a car backfired, and how they couldn't bear to sit in a restaurant unless their backs were against the wall. Virgil watched their faces and part of him wondered if they too contained other spirits within them, perhaps unknown. He half expected these other spirits to emerge as they spoke. It was time to ask for guidance.

Truth be told Virgil found church to be rather boring, even the nice Lutheran place they'd been going to in Arcadia, the one where nobody batted an eyelash at the lesbian couples and their children. He went to an Advent service to contemplate, opening his heart to the greater mysteries, however he found no explanation, much less relief. And so all week he had felt swollen with this question of the face — what was it, who was she really, how did it happen. It was at the final stoplight before turning into the airport that he decided to mention Helen's face to his brother. Virgil had not brought it up in all their recent time together, knowing he could not shine a light on the thing without casting a heavy shadow.

"I was thinking. When we were kids, you know, and how we would see her." *Her* and *she* had been the pronouns that they had given the face. They had always instinctively avoided naming her, knowing the power of a name and how it could draw forth what normally remained hidden. The fact was *she* had frightened them as much as she had frightened their father, although in a different way. One might call it astonishment, or wonder.

Gil was silent for a moment. "I haven't thought about her in a long time."

"She's never come back?"

"No. It stopped happening as I got older."

"Genevieve had her. Zalie told me."

"I'm somehow not surprised." Gil shook his head and cracked the window open. "Funny time to bring this up."

The light turned green and Virgil turned into the airport drive. A plane's belly roared to the right just as the clouds parted and the sunlight leaned across the runway. Virgil said, "I was thinking that if she was still there, this would be a good moment to, I don't know, ask for some help."

Gil laughed. “I mean, why do you think I was going to put her name on the distilling business? I thought it might be — I don’t know, shit, a kind of good luck charm.”

It was just like his brother to try to capitalize on an unspeakable mystery. Virgil tried to turn the conversation back. “I think she was trying to protect all of us. Don’t you?”

The traffic slowed down as they approached the gate. It was a small airport but busy for the holidays. They waited behind a van where a family pulled out enormous heavy suitcases, probably full of presents.

“It didn’t really work though,” said Gil. He put a cigarette to his lips but didn’t light it. “That’s the long and short of it. She tried, I could feel her trying, but it didn’t work.”

“We made it through,” Virgil said.

“You did.” Gil cleared his throat and picked his bag off the floor. “Man, this is a hell of a time to bring this up.”

“I’ll get your suitcase.” Virgil parked the car and got out.

The two brothers stood outside and waited to check-in the luggage. Gil lit his cigarette and sucked in long and hard. Amazing, thought Virgil, how well he looked after decades of pills and booze. He ought to look pickled by now, like an animal soaked in formaldehyde, yet a kind of vitality stubbornly emanated from him. It made Virgil believe that Gil might make it still, the fact that the young man could be imagined beneath his brother’s creased face, and beneath that face was a child. Had Virgil been less of a scared shitless boy himself he would have taken better care of his brother, done it with more love and less obligation. Instead his younger brother had seemed a burden. He longed to sleep in the same bed with his older brother, the only place he felt safe. His sweaty body took up half the bed at night. Sometimes he sobbed uncontrollably when their father was in a rage, which only made things worse. Sometimes, when Gil slept alone his

own bed, Gil would pee in it, and Virgil would strip the sheets before their father noticed, because if he did he would smear Gil's face in his own urine, like one would do to a dog. On the way from school, they collected aluminum cans and bottles off the roadside for money to give to their mother, who would buy food before their father could spend it on liquor. Otherwise their diets were subsidized by food stamps, and they ate vegetables from the garden, and boiled the poison out of wild pokeweed. They had not starved, and yet there were periods when Virgil remembered being hungry because there weren't any seconds, usually towards the end of the month. Once Virgil bought Gil a pineapple. Gil was five, Virgil nearly seventeen, and neither of them had eaten a pineapple before. They ate it on the porch on a cold spring day, carving the skin off in a long coil like one would with an apple. It had felt like they were eating the sun. Another time Virgil worked extra-long during the summer to buy a used guitar, and when he saw how his brother took to it, he let him have it. Gil had picked it up as naturally as a child learning to talk. In later years, when Gil lived with them as a teenager, Virgil was certain that they had both come through. But some part of Gil was maimed. It made Virgil impatient, and furthermore it reminded him of his own maiming. His brother dragged that injured part with him like a bum leg. For a moment Virgil's resolve weakened. If Gil asked right then if he could stay and go to the clinic in Cincinnati instead of this one in Arizona, he would say yes.

Gil stood there finishing his cigarette, not saying anything.

"I'll be praying for you," Virgil said. Without thinking much about it he added, "If you get sober we'd like to have you back next Christmas." He hadn't known he had changed his mind until he said it aloud.

Gil blinked at his brother then laughed. "I'm going to invite you to my place for Christmas next year, the one near Málaga. You haven't seen blue water till you've seen the

Mediterranean. I've got a friend with a boat who will take us out fishing." He patted his brother on the arm. "Sorry I fucked up Christmas this year." He was going to get clean, he was going to back into the business, he was going to buy a horse farm and live there during the summer, renovate an old tobacco barn and turn it into a house, maybe have a supper club and then turn it into a restaurant, put Arcadia on the map. He was going to talk to an actor friend in London who could tell Azalea about auditions. He was going to buy a book from Eli's think-tank. He was going to purchase two hundred handmade Christmas cards from Linda and send them to his friends. He was going to come back in six months and start looking at real estate and find a good therapist and go to AA meetings. That was his mistake this time, he hadn't gone to any of the meetings. Keep the first thing first, one day at a time.

Gil's body washed up on a beach in the south of Spain late July of the next year.

## Chapter 19

Gil's friend with a boat was actually the owner of a yacht. A small yacht, but it was a yacht. Azalea and her father had rented a car and drove from Barcelona to the small port village near Malaga, where the yacht was docked and where Gil owned yet another condo, this one smaller than the flat in Barcelona, with a narrow blue view of the Mediterranean Sea. It was early August. British and German tourists reddened in the sun. It seemed that the tourists from northern Europe were not so fond of sunscreen. Azalea wore large sunglasses and a straw hat she bought off a vendor in Barcelona. Her father had grown his beard back and seemed to be the wrong size for everything in Spain. The chairs, the car seats, the doorways—he was always on the verge of breaking something or bumping his head. The condo was also rented out as a vacation home, and one of the many white buildings that dotted the coastline and blinded you with reflective glare from the sunlight. It was sparsely decorated with IKEA furniture and felt impersonal.

They'd coordinated their trip through Ines, Gil's ex-wife, who had been the first to be contacted by the authorities. She arrived a day before Azalea and Virgil had to clean out the spoiled food from the fridge and take out the trash, mostly empty bottles of vodka. The apartment, she told Virgil, had looked like the end of a party.

The toxicology report had come back predictable. Alcohol and Oxy and a bit of cocaine.

She had greeted them in front of the building, a petite woman in her forties with amber skin and black hair streaked with white drawn up in a messy bun. She wore a simple off-white dress enhanced the oversized gold jewelry that she herself had designed. She embraced them as if she had known them forever, and started to cry when she saw Virgil. Virgil, never the type who

believed in hiding his emotions, also started to cry. They held hands crying on the sidewalk as tourists passed by them. It was so good to finally meet. Ines pushed her sunglasses onto her head. She had the eyes of a person who had been crying for day. The marriage with Gil had barely lasted a year; Gil was a terrible husband but a wonderful friend. He would do absolutely anything for you, Ines insisted.

When Azalea introduced herself, she smiled wryly. They'd been introduced before, over the phone many years ago when Azalea had called to give her condolences about Stefan from The Consonants. Ines had been the one who had sent Azalea The Consonants t-shirt and the album, who kept her birthday on Gil's calendar along with the rest of his schedule. He had a terrible sense of time, Ines wiped her cheeks. Azalea couldn't stop looking at all of her jewelry. Her earrings were opals inside gold flower petals, three layers of delicate gossamer necklace that looked handwoven, a large lapis lazuli ring on her left middle finger. Ines noticed Azalea looking at her earrings.

"I'm a little too dressed, I think." She brought her hands to her ears. "I'm wearing these today because yesterday, I came wearing sweatpants to clean. One of the neighbors, they think I'm the maid." Her mouth twitched into a grin. "They think anyone who looks Arab is a maid." Ines and her family had moved to Spain from Guadalajara, Mexico when she was eight. Her father was a Spanish businessman, she explained, as they followed her up the three flights of stairs. Her mother had been from Jalapa, where the people were darker, and after she married she found it very useful to wear diamonds to every occasion to let people know that she wasn't the help. That she could afford the caviar on the menu, or the shoes under the glass case.

Ines and Virgil were kindred spirits, warm people who met no strangers, told funny stories and believed in always having a fridge full of food. They started talking about God within

five minutes of wandering around the condo, looking at the spare, generic furnishings aside from a curious shell on a piece of wood, an old marker from the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. Gil had hiked some of it alone last May but came back early because of a sprained knee. Ines spoke of the Universe with what was obviously a capital U. Whatever you wanted to call it, the Universe, God. You needed that sort of thing in your life and Gil had been trying to find it. Azalea opened the glass door and stepped onto a narrow terrace where she escaped with her agnostic feeling. The view of the ocean was the shape of a broad triangle. She couldn't see the beach, only the dark ocean undulating like a breathing creature, between the buildings with closer views.

The fridge in Gil's apartment had been scrubbed cleaned and stocked with what Ines guessed were foods that Americans liked: skim-milk, cottage cheese, apples, a box of Raisin Bran, a small jar of peanut butter and jelly, bread wrapped in plastic. They admitted they weren't sure what to eat with the cottage cheese, they supposed the apples might go with it. Ines had studied abroad in Madison, Wisconsin for a summer and said her host family always had it. The condo smelled vaguely of sage that Ines had burned, the air conditioning was mounted high on the walls and puffed a cold version of this smoky air back into the room. Virgil asked if there was someplace nearby to buy sausages and ham. He had heard that Spain was very famous for sausage and ham. They walked to a café down the hot street, and Ines told them she had a friend who was a lawyer in Barcelona who could finalize the will with them, and help them transfer the deeds on the properties he owned.

“What do you mean, everything?” Azalea asked.

“He left everything to you, his family, of course,” Ines said. “Aside from the apartment here. He figured my husband and I might like to use it on vacation. But would you like it? I’m not really fond of the beach as much as the mountains.”

#

The ceremony was the next day on the boat. Ines picked them up in an old Saab and they drove down to the docks to meet Gil’s friend Umberto, the boat’s owner. They parked on the street and passed by a restaurant with bougainvillea growing over the terrace. Beyond the terrace was the marina. The boat was not a boat at all, but a small yacht. Umberto wore khakis and a white linen shirt over a gray polo shirt. He did not look dressed for a memorial service, but then again he did not look like he had ever been the bass player in a punk band in Berlin during the late eighties. Not even a single tattoo on his arms, just a few pinched holes of skin in his earlobes, from the days he wore earrings. He was a real-estate investor now, based in Malaga.

Another friend came, this one name Michael, a Scottish man who knew Gil from Stockholm where he’d been a D.J.. He’d just flown in this morning and was later driving to a Buddhist stupa south of there. They’d been roommates together, he said, like brothers. In their late twenties they’d gotten into a fight that had resulted in a lost molar and a partially detached ear lobe. “I thought he might kill me,” Michael said, admiringly. They hadn’t spoken in years, but Gil had called him when he had first had gone into rehab, and it was like no time had passed at all. Michael had gotten clean some years before. He had spent some time in a Buddhist monastery and he would be chanting a prayers in Tibetan, per Gil’s request, and if that was alright with everyone.

#

They drove the boat three miles off-shore, the village a hive of white that clustered densely around the coast and tapered up the mountainside. You could no longer see the tourists burning their skin in the sun, or smell the seafood lunches cooking in the restaurants. The world felt very far away, comfortably so, and Azalea thought of the astronauts, and what that must have been like to see the earth from the moon. Like this but even more.

They held hands in a circle as the waves lapped the boat up and down. It was too dizzying for anyone to close their eyes to pray. Virgil led them in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Ines read a poem from Rumi. Michael asked them to close their eyes and imagine Gil's mind stream flowing into the heart of the Buddha. Umberto had produced a song for the occasion which he played on his silver Apple laptop, and resounded through the yacht's sound system. When the song was over, they stood at the back of the yacht where a ladder led down into the sea. Ines handed Virgil the urn and insisted he and Azalea ought to do it. No, insisted Virgil, let's all three of do it together. You were his family too. Her lower lip trembled then disappeared beneath her upper lip. And somehow three people held the base of the brass urn, tipping it over the stern of the boat where it dissolved into the dark blue water. Most of the ashes fell into the ocean, while others were blown back to them like dust. That they would all be reduced to ashes struck Azalea not as a thought but as a visceral sensation, as a strong taste or a smell. There was a roughness to it, this fact that they were mostly made from space, that physically no one took up very much room. Umberto rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. Some of the ashes had blown into his eye. He said something in Spanish to Ines which made them laugh.

#

Virgil and Azalea went to the beach after lunch, mourners disguised as tourists. They found a beach umbrella in the closet of the condo and had squeezed mostly beneath it, their feet

sticking out into the sunlight. All the women on the beach wore bikinis, even the older ones with dyed auburn hair and puckered back thighs. Azalea had only packed a black one-piece swimsuit with her, the kind with a racer back that you'd wear in a lap pool, that turned the body into the most rectangular version of itself. She hadn't been sure what kind of a swimsuit to bring to a memorial service. She should have brought something in bright blue that was hung together with strings. She looked down at her long bare legs. She ought to be enjoying the supple curves of herself before they puckered then turned to ash. When she learned there was a beach nearby she had pictured herself rising at dawn to swim out to the farthest buoy, treading water as the sky changed, and having thoughts about vastness and death. It seemed like the reverent sort of way to handle the situation. But this wasn't that type of ocean. The surf was mild as a lake, the beach packed by eleven am, and as the day progressed, a film of suntan oil floated upon the surface.

Virgil had forgotten to put on sunscreen before getting into the water but he didn't really need it. He was already turning the color of toasted bread. Azalea stayed put for fifteen minutes to let the sunscreen dry, she could only find SPF 15 at the drug store. No one seemed to care about premature aging in this country. After an hour in the ocean and the tips of her dirty blonde hair had streaked with gold, her shoulders darkened with freckles. Azalea leaned back on her elbows, hypnotized by the calm lapping sea, as if it were a sedative.

"You haven't cried," Virgil remarked.

"Yes, I have," Azalea said. "I just cried alone."

"It's good to cry now," Virgil said. "So that it doesn't weigh on you."

"I've cried." Azalea insisted, but no longer sure that she had.

"You didn't cry at Gen's funeral either," her father observed.

Azalea sighed loudly and flung herself back on the towel. He tried to solve everyone else's problems when he got emotional.

"I'm just saying it's good to have a good cry. That's all. It's healthy." Tears were streaming beneath his sunglasses, the short span from eyes to beard. Surely no one else on the beach was thinking about death. On this continent, they had reserved places for that. Cathedrals. Mountaintops. Holy wells blessed by saints. Grottos stacked with skulls of plague victims. He took off his glasses, rubbed his face, and staggered to his feet. In the water her father looked like a giant otter floating on back. She went back in with him, carrying the snorkel mask she'd found in Gil's closet. She spent most of her time bobbing face down in the water, watching tiny silver fish, maybe anchovies, swimming in a valley of pebbly sand near the place where the waves broke.

When they gathered their things they forgot that they had buried their wallets in the sand. They had dug shallow holes a few inches underneath the corners of their beach towels, but they had absent-mindedly removed the towels and had lost all sense of space, only that they were, maybe, originally placed a forty-five-degree angle from a pink stucco building. They plunged their hands down into the cold sand, feeling for anything that wasn't a shell. It went on this way for an eternity before Azalea's fingers brushed a square of leather. They both counted the money as if thieves would have reburied their wallets for them, and walked back home, starving and mildly dehydrated. They ate chorizo and bread and fruit juice, and turned the TV on. The cable Gil subscribed to was surprisingly good. A lot of channels. Two HBOs. Later, when it was dark and cool, they would meet Ines for dinner.

#

Virgil asked if Ines had been a punk too. Ines stopped her fork in front of her mouth and laughed. She had met Gil in his producer phase. For a brief time, she was a D.J. and was spinning in clubs in Ibiza and at music festivals. Drum and bass sampled with old Latin songs. Gil had been sober when she met him, or mostly sober. He was trying to limit himself to hashish. Back then everyone in music was on ecstasy. She was no punk. She had dyed her hair white blonde and pink, wore body glitter and pieces of raw silk for shirts, tall platforms she'd thrifted in pawn shops. He hadn't been a punk then either. Punk was long dead by then. Punk was a zombie. The first night they met, she hadn't known he liked her. They mostly talked about their record collections, the weird bands no one had heard of.

Azalea couldn't stop yawning. She was jet-lagged and thirsty. When she closed her eyes she felt the ocean still moving beneath her. Stories were the way to heal grief, and her father and Ines were telling their stories now, sharing the pieces of Gil that the other never got to know. Gil as a scrawny little boy who could listen to a Zeppelin album and pick out the notes on Virgil's second-hand guitar. Gil as a late twenty-something who discovered tailored suits and expensive Italian shoes, who made elaborate dinners for his friends, who knew all places before the places were known. At first he talked about his childhood as if it'd been an adventure Ines said. He'd hidden away everything. He even talked about his family as if he heard from you all the time. She had joined him on The Consonants tour and in every city he sent a postcard, and bought things for his nieces and nephew. For a long time she had believed that they were close, and that at any point she would be taken to meet them.

Azalea had been part of his fantasy life, his imaginary place back home, just as he had been of her fantasy life, her imaginary place out there. She had been drinking from a carafe of red wine that felt too heavy for summer. Her gums felt shrunken. She drank more water with no

ice and as she breathed into the glass she realized she was about to cry in a public place, and she didn't want to do that. Her ex-aunt in-law and her father were in the cheerful part of their mourning. So much of their time with Gil had been experienced as a form of departure, of letting go, as if he'd been terminally ill for decades. On their faces was the clear expression of relief. They could, at last, not worry about saving him.

"There is something I want to give you. A wish from your uncle." Ines handed Azalea a small white box, and Azalea expected there to be an item of jewelry, a watch or a good luck charm. Inside the box was a round tin with more of her uncle's ashes. She shut the lid quickly so that the ashes wouldn't blow away.

"He loved the mountains best of all," Ines said. "But I have to go back to work next week. Could you do it? He would like for you to do it." She talked about Gil in the present tense, and for a while she had thought this was a mistake in her English, but this wasn't the case. It seemed to have been already decided upon by Ines and Virgil, that Azalea would be the one to fulfill this request. Virgil would meet with the attorney and Azalea could take the car.

"He got into walking in the mountains in the spring, until he hurt his foot. The toes." She had deep brown eyes and now looked directly at Azalea, as if she had known her all her life. Azalea felt like she was being embraced by someone that she had lost. Her uncle had married a very good person, and that meant he had some good in him. He must have fucked it up even more than she was letting on. "They had some nerve damage, and it hurt to walk, but he did it anyway. I'm not sure why, but he felt like he was called to do it." Ines had never heard him say he was called to do anything before. It had given her hope.

Azalea's eyes welled-up with tears. Ines reached across the table and squeezed her hand. Azalea apologized. She was very tired. Of course you are, of course, Ines said. The apartment

was a short cab drive away. Virgil said he wasn't tired at all. He had downed a coffee at four because he knew that the Spanish ate so late. When in Rome. Ines grinned and patted him on the arm. That's the spirit. He'd meet Azalea back at the apartment. When she stood up and left them so did the need to cry.

The apartment was hot and humid because they had turned off the AC. She turned on the fan and opened the terrace window. You could not hear the beach but the ocean's smell saturated the air. She was sleeping on the couch because her father had a bad back, and although she was tired it was hard to fall asleep. She wondered if Gil had said anything about Helen, how he came to her, who she had been. She was gone now too, no one needed anymore. Everyone who had needed her was now safely dead. Crying had felt like a physical need a few hours ago and now she couldn't do it. The world was pleasantly faraway, just as an hour ago it had been unbearably close. Everything was foreign and she was only here to look at it. This is why people travelled, why Gil travelled. She had been taken out of her world and put into a slightly alternate variation. The TV commercials were just as dumb, and she could make out every other word but it all went too fast to understand the humor. When she woke up with a light blanket over her, and faint sunlight peeked in and out of the fluttering drapes. She didn't know why but the world felt intensely quiet, even with the sound of the humming fans. It was quiet and dark enough to ask for the dead. No one came to her. That was expected. The late hour carried a stillness inside of it, so still that she could clearly hear her own desires. She would not go back home, not for a long while. She would stay here. Gil had left them the flat in Barcelona and enough money to pay it off. She would not make plans but wait and see what would happen, after she delivered her uncle's ashes to the mountains. One day it was possible something would call her and she would have no choice but to listen. Without asking, between the curtains, the shape of her uncle

appeared, an outline in the dark. Had she not been half asleep it's possible she would not have noticed him. He moved across his own shape and filled the room. For the rest of her life, in moments of intense quiet she would ask the dead to come to her. Most of the time they did not, and when they did they had no messages to give. She was happy they came to her anyway.